

**THE ART OF THE DRUM:  
THE RELIGIOUS AND SPIRITUAL DYNAMIC OF  
DRUMMING AND DRUM CRAFTING IN  
FIJI, JAPAN, INDIA, MOROCCO AND CUBA**

**JESSE BROWNER-HAMLIN**

**THE BRISTOL FELLOWSHIP**

**HAMILTON COLLEGE**

**[WWW.THEARTOFTHEDRUM.BLOGSPOT.COM](http://WWW.THEARTOFTHEDRUM.BLOGSPOT.COM)**

**AUGUST 2007 – AUGUST 2008**

In the original parameters of my Bristol Fellowship, I aspired to investigate the religious and spiritual dynamic of drumming and drum crafting in Fiji, Japan, India, Morocco, the Dominican Republic, and Trinidad and Tobago. As any academic will attest, field research tends to march to beat of its own drum, if you will.

The beauty of my fellowship was that I could have conducted the research in just about any country in the world. Music is everywhere; and moreover, drums are the oldest instrument known to man.

Along the way, I modestly altered the itinerary: in the end, I conducted research in Fiji, Japan, India, Western Europe, Morocco and Cuba. It truly was a remarkable experience to have full autonomy over my research: I am infinitely grateful that the Bristol Family and Hamilton College (represented by Ginny Dosch) gave me the freedom to modify my itinerary as I saw fit.

To be successful while conducting field research, you need to be flexible. While several of my hypotheses from my proposal were examined and tested, I often found myself in unscripted situations. The daily unpredictability of the fellowship is what makes it such a profound and exciting experience, as every day is an adventure.

With the blessing of technology, this fellowship was carried out in “real time.” Because I actively maintained a website, [www.theartofthedrum.blogspot.com](http://www.theartofthedrum.blogspot.com), my research and multimedia were posted almost instantaneously, and thus, my family and friends back in the States could read about my experiences, see my pictures and watch my videos.

On that note, the prospect of disseminating field research vis-à-vis technology is fascinating: on my YouTube account, I have uploaded 205 videos from my fellowship research, and as I write this, my videos have been viewed 251,309 times. It is amazing to think that over two hundred fifty thousand people have seen what I saw...

Of course, there are countless people who deserve to be thanked for assisting me throughout the preliminary application process to the preparation prior to my departure to the field research itself. To compose that list in full would be an impossible task; but, I want to thank the following people: Ted and Jamie Bristol, Ginny Dosch, Jay Williams, Noriko Fuku, Yoshimi Takagi, Gen Matsui, K. Chandran, Amine Chabi, Younes Boumehdi, Adil Hanine, and of course, my family.

The Bristol Fellowship is much more than an enriched, academic field survey: it is test of personal character and perseverance. Undoubtedly, the fellowship forces the individual to step out of his or her comfort zone. In all modesty, I am proud of myself for having completed the Bristol Fellowship.

I am so humbled to have had this extraordinary experience. Whenever I reminisce, I simply cannot believe that everything really happened: often I find myself longing to return to my life as a nomadic Bristol Fellow. It is impossible to condense such an eventful year into a single account, but, in this text, I have tried my best.

Here, I present to you an abridged version of my writings from my website: in this account, I have selected my favorite stories from my Bristol Fellowship. As you already know, you can find the full version of my chronicles on my website.

Outside of the obvious grammatical corrections, I have refrained from seriously editing these entries, as I wanted to preserve the original spirit of these writings. Furthermore, I wanted to make my writing as accessible as possible; hence, I tried to steer clear from the dryness of a “religious studies in ethnomusicology” academic mentality. With that as a preface, please understand that many of these writings are informal.

An audio compilation of the music I encountered throughout the year is included: this is a very small sample of the music I acquired, but these selections are my favorites. While reading this memoir, I would recommend listening to the CD. Please also note the



weekend. Should this come together, it will be a great opportunity to observe the musical dynamic of a Hindu wedding ceremony. Furthermore, after exchanging numbers, Jiten also graciously offered that if I want to attend a Sunday church service in a village, he would gladly arrange that, as well. It should be noted that a typical Christian Fijian mass has a tremendous musical essence to it. It is conceivable that the musicality of Christian Fijian service demonstrates how Fijians integrated elements of their own indigenous religion to Christianity. Surely, the Methodist missionaries in the 1800s did not preach the Bible with song and dance...In any event, hopefully I will be able to attend a mass to see for myself.

Although I have only scratched the surface of the city, my immediate impression is that it is a quaint, easy-going city. The intimacy of the city is quite apparent: while in the taxi, Jiten said hello (in passing) to a number of people, young and old. It's nice to see that even in the "big" city of Fiji, there is still a community feel.

What is really separates Suva from the rest of Fiji – aside from the fact that it is the largest city – is that there are almost no tourists here. Foreigners come to Fiji for the beaches and fancy (isolated) resorts. Just about every Western couple I saw on the plane was either on a honeymoon, or an older, retired couple: while I cannot fully assert that these individuals just came to Fiji for the beaches, it is safe to say that tourism is minimal in Suva. As Jiten said, "The foreigners come from a big city; so why would they want to see another big city on their holiday?"

---

**August 23, 2007**

Yesterday was my first full day in Suva. After exploring most of the city, I took a cab to the University of the South Pacific, the largest university in the South Pacific. The campus is aesthetically astounding: it is very lush and has a wide array of tropical flora. The most beautiful aspect of the campus was the botanical garden: it made me appreciate just how tremendously different the natural environment in Fiji is from New York.

After wandering around the campus, I discovered the library; but unfortunately, there was a lack of texts on Fijian music (let alone of drumming). That being said, I was not disappointed, as I am not in Fiji to conduct research in a library: this fellowship provides me the unique opportunity to do actual field research. All in all, it was very nice to familiarize myself with the USP campus.

After spending the afternoon at USP, I returned back to my hotel for a short nap, to rest up for the weeklong, annual Hibiscus Festival. Well, I guess the jetlag finally caught up with me, as I fell asleep at six and woke up just after midnight. I will go to the Hibiscus Festival tonight, as I missed last night's celebrations.

---

**August 23, 2007**

I woke up rather early on Thursday, as I technically went to bed at 6pm on Wednesday night. (Just to clear up any potential confusion, Fiji is 17 hours ahead of the East Coast, so that basically means I am a whole day ahead of all of you). After writing some journal entries, I wandered around the city, poking in and out of record shops, which Suva has a plethora of. I bought a CD of an Indo-Fijian tabla player, and also of the first Indo-Fijian reggae band (the album is twenty years old, so it's nothing groundbreaking but still does sound pretty neat) from a record store called Procera Music. The slogan for Procera is, "Procera Music Shop is food of love." I mean I get it, but what?

After departing from the Procera Music Shop, I began to search for a music shop that sold instruments, chiefly lalis and tabla sets. The tabla is a pair of Indian hand drums, and undoubtedly is the most common percussion instrument of India. The lali is the percussion instrument most synonymous with Fijian music: among ethnomusicologists, it is believed that the lali was the first percussion instrument on the Fiji Islands. Made exclusively from wood, the size (in terms of length) of a lali can range from six inches to six feet! This wooden slat drum looks like a tree trunk that has been cut in half and hollowed. The lali is played with wooden sticks, and gives off a very loud, earthy sound. Traditionally, the lali was used as a means of communication: different beats were

developed to signify anything from the commencement of a religious event, wedding, funeral, birth, battle, or to simply announce to the village that fisherman pulled in a great catch. Moreover, different sized lalis were used for specific occasions and reasons.

At a store called South Pacific Music, I found tablas; but, disappointingly they were made in Mumbai, India. I asked if there were any local tabla crafters, and the woman who worked at the SPM said that they only import tablas, and never have heard of anyone who makes them locally. That was kind of a bummer, but there is nothing I can do about it. I know I will meet many tabla crafters in India.

I also have been having a hard time finding a genuine lali crafter. I did find lalis for sale, but it was at a generic tourist handcraft center. For kicks, I bought a mini six-inch lali: it is not really playable, but I did not want to commit to buying a standard-sized lali, which are about two, two-and-a-half feet long and weigh a ton. I also want to buy a lali directly from a crafter, not at some tourist trap store.

Tonight, I will go to the Hibiscus Festival. I am very excited to hear some live music!

---

### **August 24, 2007**

Last night, I attended the Hibiscus Festival, an annual, weeklong festival, held in downtown Suva. The festival is geared towards children, as there are many carnival-like rides, including several very precarious ferris wheels. There is also a wide range of food booths, although most are barbeque and candied popcorn. As with all festivals, the ground is a sloppy mud that cakes your footwear with grossness. (I'm being melodramatic – it wasn't that bad; but, I did have to wash my sandals when I got back).

For me, the point of interest was the Fijian arts stage, which had various musical and dance acts. I saw several dance troupes (which unfortunately performed to CDs, not live music), but the real highlight was the live music. The most notable act was a group called, The First Tribe – a Fijian reggae band consisting of drums, auxiliary percussion,

drums, bass, guitar, keys and vocals; with the bassist, guitarist and keyboardist all providing the vocal harmonies.

The First Tribe covered Bob Marley's "Small Axe" and "Africa Unite." When the bass line of "Small Axe" began, I immediately recognized it, as it just happens to be my all-time favorite Bob Marley song. Hearing a cover of one of my favorite songs was a real treat: it definitely made my night. In addition to various Marley covers, The First Tribe played a handful of original numbers. While many of Bob Marley's songs have an indisputable connection to Rastafarianism (the track "War" is almost verbatim a reading of a speech given by Haile Selassie, the central prophet of Rastafarianism), many of his songs have a broad sense of spiritualism. That is, his songs spoke of an Almighty God, but not necessarily in the context of a religious institution. Perhaps Marley understood that formalized religions – with their intricately strange rituals and strict hierarchies – alienate many people. Establishing a spiritual connection with the Divine does not always require the guidance of a man-made institution. This general concept seemed to be true with the original songs of The First Tribe: all of the songs had a very pious vibe to them, with no obvious connection to a specific religious institution. One such lyric sung: "Acknowledge Him / Who created you / Give thanks to Him / Who created you / Give praise to Him."

After two seemingly nondenominational songs, the direction of the band changed. It became clear that The First Tribe had a Christian influence, with lyrics like, "Jesus is the way / Jesus is the light," and, "Come back sister / Come back brother / Let the Lord Jesus come and take each other / See the heart of the Lord / Happiness forever." The crowd probably was 99% indigenous Fijian; but only about 5% seemed enthusiastic about the religious message. But those who were supportive of the Christian message would cheer when Jesus' name was sung. It is interesting to see "Jesus reggae:" when I think of contemporary Christian music, I think of Christian rock, country music, and Southern Baptist gospel music. While I have heard of Christian rap before (it's really okay if you haven't), I have never heard of Christian reggae before.

Reggae music has a direct connotation to the Rastafarian religion, not Christianity. While Bob Marley was born a Christian, his conversion to Rastafarianism had a major influence on his music. Fijian Christian reggae represents a marriage of popular religion with popular culture. From the institution's perspective, this unification is logical. This fusion is not only accessible to the audience as the music genre is familiar, but also actively spreads a Christian message.

After I left the Hibiscus Festival, on my walk home, I wound up stopping at a reggae bar. The band, Cool Runnings, was a mix of Fijians and Australians, covering a range of artists, from Bob Marley to Stevie Wonder. They actually sounded great, but I was too pooped to stay, so I called it a night.

---

**August 26, 2007**

Perhaps the most disappointing aspect of Suva has been the widespread racism throughout the city. In order to understand the racial tensions of Fiji, it necessary to know a bit of the nation's history: about 40% of the Fijian population is of Indian decent. The strong Indian diaspora throughout Fiji is actually a result of the American Civil War: in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, because of the ongoing war, the States stopped producing cotton. Several British entrepreneurs began to expand Fiji's cotton industry by employing Indian indentured servants on ten- or fifteen-year work contracts. At the end of these contracts, many of the Indians chose to stay on Fiji, rather than return to India. By staying in Fiji, the Hindu Indians were able to abandon the discriminatory caste system. Although there are no definitive statistics, it can be assumed that many of the Indians that came to Fiji were of the lower or untouchable castes. (What incentive would a Brahmin have to leave India, and lose his high social standing?)

In regards to my research, this history is of great interest: in India, a lower caste Hindu could never be a musician commissioned by a temple. From a traditionalist perspective, if a Daalit (untouchable) is spiritually impure and "polluted," how could that individual perform religious, sacredly pure music? So it should be interesting to see if any Hindu

Indo-Fijian musicians know anything about their family's former standing in the caste system.

Returning back to the subject matter, in the past 48 hours, I have had three encounters with indigenous Fijians telling me never to buy from the Indian or Chinese (they are a very small minority) shops; that these groups are denying the prosperity of the indigenous Fijians. One man showed me his credentials – he was a member of the city council!!! I guess racism and politics have gone hand-in-hand for some time now.

It is unjustifiable how intolerant the indigenous Fijians can be: the Indo-Fijians are full citizens, born in Fiji, and in the vast majority of cases, have never even been to India. In all honesty, I do understand the frustration of the indigenous Fijians: there is poverty throughout the city, and, at times, it does appear that “Indians” (Indo-Fijians) run the majority of the shops. Nevertheless, according to government statistics I have read, actually the unemployment rate is higher amongst Indo-Fijians than indigenous Fijians. Furthermore, compared to any other indigenous group, the indigenous Fijians have it pretty good: indigenous Fijians own 83% of all of the land. What percentage of American land do Native Americans own? What percentage of land do the Incans hold? In comparison to other indigenous groups, the indigenous Fijians situation is not as dire.

(An ongoing political issue is that many Indo-Fijians are living on indigenous Fijian owned land, that was leased on 99-year contracts that were signed about 95 years ago or more. Already, many Indo-Fijians are being kicked off these lands, giving them no place to go).

As you can read, the level of intolerance by the indigenous Fijians is completely unacceptable to me. As a result of recent coups (there have been a handful since 1987), Indo-Fijians are not permitted to be elected as Prime Minister. How can a country call itself a democracy if there is legal discrimination against an individual from one ethnic/religious group from ever being elected as PM?

Before my arrival to Fiji, I was aware of this religious/cultural dynamic. In my cab ride from the airport to the city, I asked Jiten about such tensions, and he said that they are present in Suva, but elsewhere it is not a serious issue. When I asked if he had any indigenous Fijian friends, he said, “Of course! Hindus and Fijians live like this [he put his index finger together with his middle finger] in my town.” Jiten lives in Levuka (the country’s original capital), which is on a tiny island named Ovalau about four hours (by boat) from Suva.

Yet, although it is obviously upsetting to see a resistance to multiculturalism, I have met one man – a taxi driver named Sai – who lamented to me that the discrimination of the indigenous Fijians has hurt the country more than it has helped. Sai, who is an indigenous Fijian, said that both tourism and international economic aid are down because of the political instability. (It should be noted that there was a non-violent coup this past December. Further, though the country is safe, the political situation is quite volatile these days). Sai said he has no problem with Indians, and essentially the indigenous Fijians can’t blame their struggles on the success of others. It was very refreshing to hear an indigenous Fijian declare that he too was tired of the rampant racism throughout the city, and government.

This fellowship permits me to learn, in-depth and through a first-hand account, of two my great passions, music and religious studies. Nevertheless, I have already realized that throughout this year, I will be learning much, much more than the subject of religious studies in ethnomusicology. From conversing with the locals, I already have gained a broad sense of understanding the dynamic of Fijian daily life. It is extremely interesting to learn about all the cultural intricacies and political struggles of Fiji, in addition to the more light-hearted musical culture.

---

**August 27, 2007**

After an unexpected change of plans, I now find myself on the island of Kadavu, at an eco-resort called Matava. Kadavu has the tiniest airport I’ve ever seen; the runway was

more like a driveway than airport runway! Kadavu is the fourth-largest island of Fiji; but the population is a meager 12,000. There are, approximately, seventy villages spread across the island; most of which are situated right on the coast. As a stark contrast to Suva, the population here is 99% indigenous Fijian (the other 1% being European, not Indo-Fijian).

Where I am staying is absolutely beautiful: Matava, essentially, is a traditional Fijian village. All of the housing are bures (thatch huts). The absence of electricity and cell phone service gives Matava a real authentic feel to it. Although a European couple owns the place, all of the workers here are from the nearby village. There are only about half a dozen guests at Matava. As you can imagine, everyone is extremely friendly, which creates a great community atmosphere.

On Sunday, I did something I never did in my life before: I went to church. Fijian church services are renowned for their amazing choirs; so that was the main appeal for me. After a twenty-five minute hike along on the shore (actually at several points I was wading in the water up to my knees!) and across the forest, I arrived at the Church of the Nazarene. The church is situated on top of a very tall hill, and overlooks a bay: it truly couldn't be a more beautiful location.

The service itself was not as dazzling as the view, but it was a worthwhile experience. The first hour of the service was a Bible study, followed by an hour-and-a-half of live music. The band consisted of keys, bass, two female vocalists and, believe it or not, Western-style drums! While I did not necessarily come to Fiji to see a drum kit played in a church, it was still very enlightening to see how not only Western religion has been imported to Fiji, but also Western music. Of course, it was not as invigorating as it would have been to see a lali (Fijian drum) used in the service, but it was still neat.

The service was conducted entirely in Fijian, but the reverend would stop occasionally to explain what was Bible passage was being discussed. (I actually was given an English copy of the Bible to follow along). At the conclusion of the service, I introduced myself

to the drummer, a man in his late twenties named Josaia, or Jo for short. He has been playing drums only for three months – and this was evident in his performance – so after I told him that I have been playing for many years, he asked if I could give him a lesson. We arranged that on Monday, I would come back to the church.

---

### **August 28, 2007**

I just returned from giving my first drum lesson ever: it actually went very well. For me, it is strange that I came to Fiji to *learn* about drums, but instead have been in the position to *teach* drums. (But, as they say, it is best to learn by teaching). I taught Jo some basic beats, how to properly hold the drumsticks, arrange the kit, and other fundamental drum-knowledge. Jo mostly wanted me to just play, so he could learn by observing. Towards the end of the lesson, Pastor Aserl and his twelve-year-old son observed my teachings. He was very appreciative that I was teaching Jo. The lesson lasted for just over an hour, and afterwards they boated me back to Matava. I genuinely enjoyed teaching Jo so much that tomorrow (and Wednesday) I will return to conduct additional lessons. I even learned how to say “drum” in Fijian – ramu.

On another research-related note, one of the coolest things about Matava is that before every meal is served, a lali is beat to let everyone know the food is ready. Too bad my mom didn't have a lali when I was growing up!

---

### **August 30, 2007**

Last night, I gave Jo another lesson. It was just the two of us for the duration of the lesson, so we were able to really focus. Again, he mostly wanted just to watch me play; but, I also had him sit behind the kit, so I could give him some pointers. I firmly believe that as much as he learns by watching, he is better off learning by playing. I have really emphasized that practice (and more practice!) is the only way to play the drums well. Jo has great rhythm, so I told him that he just needs to be able to translate what is up in his head to the physical motions of playing.

Tonight, I gave Jo his last lesson. The catch was about sixteen people watched on. Everyone just wanted to hear me play! It was very flattering, and mildly awkward banging away rock beats in a church! It was quite a funny scene, me playing drums with a crowd of people around me. One of the men started playing his guitar, so we jammed for a couple of songs. It was really cool playing while one guy is on guitar, and about four or five other guys sang traditional Fijian Christian songs.

It truly was a memorable experience, especially as this was my last night on Kadavu. Tomorrow I will return to Suva.

---

**August 31, 2007**

Like so many other aspects of life, with field research, the most interesting experiences and situations come at the least expected times. Today was meant to be a slow day, as the rain and the grey clouds failed to forfeit to blue skies. After running some errands in downtown Suva (including a much-needed trip to the laundromat!), I caught a cab to the University of the South Pacific. At USP, there is the, "Oceania Center for Arts and Culture," which basically is the general arts and music department for the university. I introduced myself to the head of the department, and he explained to me that they don't focus much on traditional Fijian music, but instead on contemporary music. My immediate reaction to this was disappointment, as I had anticipated researching traditional music exclusively; nevertheless, field research requires a degree of flexibility.

I was then introduced to three students: Asal, Peter and Iliese. Over the past year, Iliese, and another student named Calvin, have created and crafted a new percussion instrument: the bampipe. The bampipe is comprised of seven PVC tubes of different lengths, some of which are almost five feet long. (There is also a bass bampipe that is almost twice as long as the regular one). Each tube is lined with retractable cardboard tubes of different thicknesses. All of the tubes are tied together in a neat manner. The seven tubes account for the seven keys of the music staff (A, B, C, D, E, F, and G). To give the bampipe an

“earthy” look to it, it has been spray painted a dark copper color, with green stencils of ferns. The bampipe is played with the most random thing possible: a busted old sandal.

After performing several jams, the three guys played a tune I immediately recognized, Bob Marley’s “I Shot The Sheriff.” The sound of this innovative instrument is truly awesome; but, because of its uniqueness, I couldn’t help but think of the following questions:

What is a drum? What is percussion? Surely, hand drums like an Indian tabla or a Cuban conga meet the prerequisites to be categorized as “drums and percussion.” Furthermore, drums that are played with sticks and mallets – such as a timpani or snare drum – also fit those standards, right? I would think that is uncontested.

So what about seven perfectly pitched PVC tubes played with an old sandal? Is that percussion? Since it can provide a fluid rhythm, I would say yes; although, maybe it simply cannot be categorized. (Western academics must always label, even if such a label is either unnecessary, or impossible).

This research, initially, sought to focus on traditional drum and percussion instruments; yet, I cannot ignore new, innovative means of percussion. Who cares what exactly is played as long as the beat is there and the rhythm is maintained.

After I was given the mini, personal performance, Iliese (the one who was actually playing the bampipe) told me that next month they – The Bampipe Band – are going to Shanghai to perform at a music festival, and then will be touring China for three or four weeks. I told him they should try to play some shows in New York City; I’m sure it would be a hit!

Lastly, this evening I went back to USP to watch a dance performance that had live music. The performance was about the struggles of a young love. In all honesty, I have never been too keen on abstract theatre, but this was pretty good. The paintings on the set

were really great, and the music was very cool. The band was just comprised of a cello, three conga drums, and a small lali. The two drummers just wore bulas (the male skirts) and had face and body paint. It was pretty wild.

---

### **September 1, 2007**

Today, I finally made it to the Fiji Museum. The museum is cluttered with ancient Fijian paraphernalia; the highlights include a full-sized catamaran, nose flutes (that's right), war clubs, and, of course, cannibal forks. Fiji, in fact, was the last country in the world to practice cannibalism as a socially acceptable custom; the practice ended only in the 1870s.

There was also a lali that had been used by the Wesleyan Church in Suva – the first church in Fiji. Lalis were beaten (and still are today) before church, as a way to notify people that the mass was (is) about to begin. This practice had been employed prior to Christianity in Fiji, to announce the beginning of the service at the temple (burekalou, in Fijian). The museum had a really nice gift shop: I bought an academic journal on the history of the lali and drumming in Fiji! It is pretty old, but I look forward to reading it – it's definitely a resource that I cannot find on the internet.

After almost a week of anticipation, I went to the Hindu wedding with Jiten and his family tonight. The actual ceremony is tomorrow, but tonight was the big celebration. There were about two hundred (maybe even more) people; and yes, I was the only non-Hindu there. As always, people were very friendly, and I was given a warm welcome. The food and kava were great, but the real reason I went was for the music.

There were actually two music groups that performed: one traditional and one contemporary. The traditional group was not a traditional Hindustani ensemble (tabla, sitar/sarod, harmonium), but instead was a much more basic group, with one male drummer playing a dholak (hand drum) and three women playing chaags (like little finger cymbals & bells). The contemporary band, called the Sonnets Orchestra, included three

singers (two female), a bassist, a keyboardist, and three kinds of drummers, playing Western-style drums, conga hand drums, and an electronic drum pad. For me, the electronic drum pad was the most intriguing aspect of the band, as it often was in place of a tabla. The idea that a traditional instrument has been replaced by a feat of technology is fascinating to me. Does that represent the “new soul” of Hindu Indo-Fijian music? The Sonnets Orchestra mostly played Indian pop music, with a UB-40 cover thrown in the mix (actually that song was dedicated to me...kind of awkward).

The music at the wedding was an interesting juxtaposition of antiquity and modernity. That being said, there definitely was more of an emphasis on the contemporary band, as they played much longer.

This evening shed some new insights and realization about my research here in Fiji. Throughout this research, I think I might have been wrong to attempt to associate Hindu Indo-Fijian music with Hindu Indian music (Hindustani or Carnatic). While both genres share a religious and cultural connection, the truth is that a Hindu Indo-Fijian has surprisingly little in common with a Hindu Indian. Sure, on a broad enough spectrum, the two can be lumped together; but, when analyzing through the lens of music, the reality is that these two groups are very unique.

The simple difference of having, or not having, the caste system explains why two schools of music with similar backgrounds can differ so greatly.

Maybe this analysis will change after the culmination of research in Fiji and India; nonetheless, as of now, I must admit I am a little shocked with how different religious/traditional music of Hindu Indo-Fijians and Hindu Indians are.

Indeed, Indian pop music has embraced musical technologies (like the drum machine); regardless, religious Hindustani music still follows a very orthodox agenda. Some Hindustani musicians still do not even permit their music to be recorded!

Despite that I have been surprised with the “traditional” Hindu Indo-Fijian music scene, I am not completely baffled by it: I do understand why it differs from traditional Hindustani music. I think it boils down to the following concept (and I have written about this before): when the Hindu Indian indentured servants came to Fiji in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century, they were predominately from the lowest castes. Musicians of the temple, with almost no exceptions, are from upper, or at least middle, castes. Furthermore, Indian music is an inter-familial art passed down from generation to generation. Therefore, in Fiji, the prospect of a Hindu Indo-Fijian musician who has a musical lineage spanning countless generations back in India seems relatively unlikely. (This general concept is applicable to the craftsmen of Indian musical instruments).

And all of this explains why at a Hindu Indo-Fijian wedding, the role of the tabla has been relegated by a synthetic, electric drum pad.

---

### **September 2, 2007**

I had read in my guidebooks that everything in Suva is closed on Sundays; but, I didn't realize that they meant *everything*. Most restaurants aren't even open today! You could cross the busiest street with your eyes closed! It's actually kind of creepy how dead this place is...

On a positive note, there is a church right next to the place I am staying at, and there have been choirs singing all day.

---

### **September 3, 2007**

Another productive day: I went to the Laxmi Narayan Temple. (To brush up on your knowledge of the deities of Hindu pantheon, Laxmi is the wife of Vishnu). Like all Hindu temples in Suva, there was a heavy-duty metal gate that surrounds the temple. When I arrived, the gate was closed; and the gatekeeper seemed rather ambivalent on letting me in. After I explained the purpose of my visit, the man, Chut, began to warm up. He told

me that the head priest was out, but would be returning shortly. The temple was pretty nice; it had a great view of the greener side of Suva. The most interesting aspect of the temple was a massive Shiva Lingam: there were three large wooden cobras coming out of the lingam to form a trident, one of the staple symbols of Lord Shiva.

The priest, a middle-aged man named Jayndra Shatri, did not speak very much English. Fortunately, another man, who was probably only in his late twenties, name Niraj happily served as my translator. I asked Jayndra about the role of music within the temple, and he said yes, especially for, “big functions and festivals.” When I asked him if there were any musicians commissioned by the temple on a regular basis, he said yes; and that, on Mondays, Tuesdays and Fridays, during puja (Hindu temple service), the musicians frequently perform. He gave me the contact information of Somal, the regular temple tabla player; so I will definitely try to set up an interview with him this week.

When I left the temple, Jayndra gave me a prasad of two Gala apples. Typically in India, prasad consists of little sugar cubes, so it was very “Indo-Fijian” to give an endemic (er, exclusive to the South Pacific and New Zealand, so not exactly “endemic” but you get the idea) fruit as prasad.

Some other locals (who are non-Hindus) have told me that the temple is for Gujaratis. This is important to note, as Indo-Fijians of Gujarat descent typically did not come to Fiji as indentured servants. Around the First World War, many Gujaratis emigrated from India to Fiji as business entrepreneurs. Therefore, it is entirely possible that Indo-Fijians of Gujarat descent retained a more orthodox form of Hinduism. With all of that in mind, I would hypothesize that religious music of Indo-Fijians of Gujarat descent is closer to classical Hindustani music than any other Hindu Indo-Fijian group. (Man, sometimes all of these academic labels are a mouthful!)

---

**September 3, 2007**

I just discovered something pretty cool: the currency here is based on the British Pound, so on all of the notes, there is a picture of the Queen. But, on the tail side of all of the coins there is a cultural picture; like on the 50-cent piece there is a picture of the war catamarans used by Fijian warriors in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. On the one-cent coin, there is a picture of the kava bowl. (The equivalent would be if the US penny had a beer can on it!). On the five-cent piece, there is a lali with the i-uaua (the two sticks used to beat the lali)!

It is pretty incredible to think that the lali, a simple percussion instrument, is so much apart of the cultural identity that it is depicted on a coin.

Without a doubt, the lali is symbol of cultural pride; yet, perhaps there is a greater subconscious meaning to it. I might be overanalyzing this, but perhaps by putting the lali on the five-cent piece, it demonstrates how traditional Fijian culture has prevailed in a modern Christian context.

Sure, Fiji has embraced Christianity with open arms; but, like in so many other cultures, Christianity has been fused with the indigenous traditions of the converted country. Lalis, once used in the pagan religious services in Fiji, are still present in the Christian church services today.

Again, this is a classic example of a Westerner trying to academically explain a random cultural tidbit; but, I do think it is neat that Fijians have been able to retain a little piece of their heritage.

---

### **September 4, 2007**

It is 9:14pm and I just returned from a Hindu puja (religious service) at the Shirdi Sai Mandir. I had visited the temple earlier in the day, and spoke to a man named Jiten (I guess that is a popular name amongst Hindu Indo-Fijians these days), and he invited me

to attend tonight's service. Jiten #2 had told me that music is performed during the service; but, it turned out not to be the case.

That being said, for several reasons, I am not disappointed about going to the puja. There definitely was a musical element to the service: the prayers were, in fact, sung, so it was very pleasant to listen to. The absence of a musical performance also made me wonder the following: if this service were held in India, would there have been a musical accompaniment? With the notable absence of music, the puja felt entirely "Indian" – although that's not to say every puja in India has music.

It was pretty remarkable to be fully immersed in "India" in Fiji: everything from the smell of the burning incense to the flashing lights of the temple brought back profound memories from my time spent in India in the Fall of 2005. Although Suva has a prevalent Indian influence, this was the first time I truly felt that I was not in Fiji.

Another interesting note of the temple: like so many other Hindu temples, this temple was laden with iconography of other religions, as in Christian crosses, stars of David, and the crescent moon with star to represent Islam (although that is misleading, as symbolism is prohibited in Islam; the crescent moon with star that is associated with Islam is just the symbol of the Islamic Ottoman Empire, but is not directly affiliated with the religion). My favorite was the two statues of Jesus and Mary, both garnished in offerings just like the statues of Krishna, Ganesh, and other popular Hindu gods.

There was a giant engraving that read, "Love All Serve All." As daunting as Hinduism can be – due to its extremely complex and sometimes contradictory nature – I am always impressed with how accepting the religion seeks to be. Hinduism tends to absorb everything around it: the teachings of Jesus, Mohammed, Gautama, you name it, are all accepted within the realms of Hinduism. Indeed, Hinduism is an all-encompassing religion; nevertheless, that ideology is not necessarily practiced throughout of the sects of the religion.

---

**September 6, 2007**

Not surprisingly, cab drivers have been some of my best resources here in Suva. I have met countless cabbies that have given me some great advice on how and where to conduct my research. Jiten, my first taxi driver in Fiji, has been a tremendous resource; because of him, I was able to attend that Hindu wedding.

After I left USP, I hailed a teal-colored Victoria Cutlass; a truly vintage cab. The driver, named Rohit Ali, was a Muslim Indo-Fijian; for the record, he is a Sunni. After explaining the essence of my research, Ali told me that he plays tabla for qawwali, the religious music of Islam. (It should be noted that the Indian tabla is used in both music of Hinduism and Islam). At this point, we had just arrived at my apartment, and I told him that I would like to interview him. He said he was working, so I made the suggestion that we just drive around, with the meter running, so I could continue to ask him questions.

We drove for about half-an-hour, and I got to see a totally new part of Suva – around the neighborhood where the White House, the Parliament (now defunct, as the military retains total control of the government), and some religious seminaries all are. It was a beautiful drive, and the interview itself was really informative.

Ali has no formal tabla training; but, he is able to play qawwali, the musical accompaniment to readings from the Qu’ran or other Islamic texts. I asked him if anyone in his family were tabla players, or musicians at the least, and he said that he was the first musician in his family. This is very intriguing and supports my hypothesis that Indian religious music (qawwali or Hindustani music) in Fiji is dissimilar to the equivalent in India. Unlike India, musicians in Fiji often do not have a familial connection to the music they are playing; that is, music is not taught generation to generation.

When I asked Ali what incited his interest in learning how to play the tabla, he said one day when he was eighteen, he, “was watching the [qawwali] singers, and became interested. Then one day, there was no tabla player, so I filled in.” Apparently, there is

not a strict set of guidelines (of having to have formalized training) to perform qawwali in Fiji. To compare that to India, typically the tabla player must study the instrument for years before he is able to *touch* the drum, let alone perform with it! As I hypothesized, it seems that there is not a rigid musical system here in Fiji.

When I asked how he learned to play qawwali – as it is a difficult genre of music that requires specific rhythms for specific passages from the Qu’ran – he said he simply watched the hand and finger motions of other players, and learned that way. Rohit did assert that, “You either have the qawwali in you or you do not.” That quotation can be interpreted as playing qawwali is a spiritual matter: it is something that you are born with, and cannot necessarily be “learned.”

Ali told me that he performs for various religious services, ranging from Islamic holidays to birth ceremonies. When I asked if there were any upcoming events he would be performing at, he informed that because Ramadan is approaching (the month of fast for Muslims), music is not being performed.

Towards the end of our conversation, I asked him several questions about the tabla itself. Ali does not own his own tablas; and uses the mosque’s set when he performs. When I told him that I have had difficulty in locating a tabla crafter, he confirmed what I already knew, that all tablas in Fiji are imported from India. When I asked him why he thought that was, he said that Fiji does not have all the proper materials to construct tablas. I explained my theory – that there probably was an absence of crafters to come to Fiji as indentured servants, because they would already have had respectable jobs back in India – he said that was a definite possibility. He then asserted that, “Under the old girit (indentured servant) system, they would just bring over the instruments,” if they needed them. So it seems that there never have been tabla crafters in Fiji, and that there never will be!

The truth is that I have actively been ignoring the Muslim Indo-Fijian population here, as I have felt that between the Hindu and indigenous populations would provide a sufficient

amount of research. While that may be so, I now realize it is silly to disregard an important religious group, and I should use every potential resource.

---

### **September 7, 2007**

Hands down, Friday was the best day I've had in Fiji. I woke up early and went over to the Oceania Centre for Arts and Culture at the University of the South Pacific. I met with Professor Epeli Hau'ofa, the founder and director of the Oceania Centre. The Professor, sporting a big bushy beard and large lens glasses, and I chatted for over two-and-a-half hours, with our conversation wandering from my research to the history of the Oceania Centre to the music industry to fusion music to traditional Fijian music to New York City, and to several other random topics.

When the Oceania Centre for Arts and Culture was founded in 1997, the Professor sought to create, "a physical environment that is conducive to the arts." For the very reason, the Centre is an open-aired building. By connecting the arts to the natural environment, artistic creativity is able to blossom. When developing the Centre, the Professor wanted it to be, "open and noisy like [typical] Pacific communities." The Professor admitted the challenge of the duality of creating a space that is conducive to the arts, yet draws upon traditional Pacific community values (because Pacific communities do not generally foster the creative arts for the individual). Nonetheless, by having different fields (music, art and dance) under the same roof, there is an "organic development of the arts." There are massive sculptures and even larger paintings scattered throughout the space; nevertheless, there is a definite fluid organization to the Centre.

The Professor emphasized that program at the Oceania Centre must not only have a space with a relaxed feel to it, but also that the "academic" program itself be as informal as possible. Therefore, there are no classes at the Oceania Centre. Rather than teaching out of a textbook in a classroom, on their own prerogative, the students learn by observing others. Although some students only focus on a single discipline (as in music, art or dance), the majority of the students work in more than one area of study.

Professor Hau'ofa did underscore that the Centre only admits, "gifted students," and that the talents of the students are not taught, but rather, they are nurtured. The Centre draws on certain, "Western ideas," specifically, "the freedom to create; [and] always having the opportunity to experiment."

Interestingly enough, according to the Professor, many of the students would be unemployed if not enrolled in the school; and in fact, several of the students have criminal records, including one individual that was in and out of the Fijian prison system for over ten years. The Professor firmly believes that the Oceania Centre provides many opportunities for a creative outlet for sometimes-troubled individuals.

The combination of an informal environment and nontraditional educational philosophy create the ideal setting for an arts program: thus, the student is given complete freedom to expand his or her talents. Professor Hau'ofa asserted that while the students, "learn informally, they call me 'Bosso.' I am the elder of the 'village.'"

When we first spoke specifically on the music program at the Oceania Centre, the Professor instilled in me the following (unofficial) mission statement: "The idea is to develop a music that is distinctly [South] Pacific." Biting on a hand-rolled cigarette, the Professor told me, "You have to come up with something that is yours; [but also] it has to be accessible." The Professor noted that the presence of, "the U.S. pop sound is [felt] everywhere," and this, undoubtedly, limits the possibility of the rebirth of Fijian music, as the youth are more interested in American pop music than traditional Fijian music. He lamented the difficulties in doing so, but remained optimistic. The Professor continued, "We want to develop music that people will take seriously."

Choosing his words carefully, Professor Hau'ofa affirmed that, "People have to invent new music," and that people of the South Pacific must, "find in inspiration from tradition; [but be careful] not to replicate" that tradition. One example of this idea in practice is one student, Calvin Rore, has revived the nose flute, a traditional South Pacific instrument that has almost no modern appreciation. Calvin has recorded a record of original

compositions for the nose flute; so that in itself demonstrates how a (dying) traditional instrument is employed in a modern setting. Essentially, the music created at the Oceania Centre is a reinterpretation of a traditional art in a contemporary context.

This provided a smooth transition to the research of this fellowship. In regards to my research, the Professor and I talked extensively on the Centre's creation of the bampipe – a product of a collaborative effort between the Professor and Calvin Rore (although, in reality, there has been much input and influence from other students at the Centre).

The bampipe first was conceptualized last January. Constructed from everyday materials (PVC piping, cardboard tubes, and rubber) and played with a common object (a flip-flop), the bampipe represents a great feat for contemporary Fijian music. The instrument not only is “easy” to construct (in comparison to a piano, for instance), but also still maintains a traditional South Pacific music sound. It should be noted that there is a patent pending on the bampipe.

The bampipe already has drawn notable recognition in the international music scene: the students at the Oceania Centre have been invited to China to perform at the inaugural Asia Youth Festival, which will be broadcasted throughout Asia. The two-week festival of music and dance has representatives from twenty-five different cultures; furthermore, Fiji is the only country from the South Pacific, including Australia and New Zealand!

Professor Hau'ofa told me that many years ago, he spent some time in Trinidad, and was fascinated by the steel drums there. He said that the steel drums were a definite influence on the bampipes: both are percussion instruments that can provide the rhythm *and* the melody of a song. Furthermore, both are constructed from everyday objects. In the grandest vision, the bampipes someday will be to Fiji what the steel drum is to Trinidad.

For me, all of this fit so perfectly into the research I am conducting: it is pretty incredible that I have already found a concrete connection between my first destination on my

itinerary and my final stop. [Although, as we all know now, my visit to Trinidad did not come to fruition].

And all of this happened before 12:30pm.

---

**September 8, 2007**

As I may have mentioned before, where I am staying in Suva is right next door to a church; so this morning, I was awoken by the beating of lalis and the singing of a choir. Not bad way to start a day, I must admit.

I finally met Somal today – the local tabla player who I have been trying to track down. He was much younger than I had expected; he’s only 26. We walked and talked for a while before sitting down at a café for about two hours. Our conversation ranged from his musical background to his guru to Indian music, in general.

Somal has been studying tabla for three years, and is the first musician in his family. This seems to be a reoccurring theme in my research among Indo-Fijian musicians (Hindu or Muslim) here in Fiji: I have yet to meet a second-generation musician. Again, as I have written before, if this were India, the exact opposite would be true.

Somal explained to that in Hindustani music, there are five gharanas (schools/methods to teach music): there is Delhi, Punjab, Purab, Lucknow/Farukabaad, and Arjada. His gharana is very small, it is called Arjada; and, it originates from the village of Meerut, outside of Delhi. He was very proud of the fact that his gharana is the most exclusive gharana; he said that even in India, it is not widely practiced or even really known about. I had actually heard of the other four gharanas before, but never of Arjada.

I commented that it is pretty unusual that of all gharanas to be practiced in Fiji, the least common one back in India is practiced here. Somal just thought it is “good luck.” To be honest, I am not sure what to make of this: it just might be the luck of the draw, that

Somal's guru studied Arjada and that's simply how the cards fell. It is not that important to dwell on, but I would have assumed that the most popular gharana in India would be the most popular gharana here. Then again, most of assumptions prior to arriving in Fiji have been wrong...But I don't think there is anything inherently wrong with that: field research is supposed to be unpredictable!

Somal's guru is an Indo-Fijian named Pandit Sanjesh Prasad. When Pandit Prasad was younger, he received a four-year scholarship to study tabla in Delhi. It is interesting to note that Somal's guru studied in India; probably because there were not adequate tabla teachers in Fiji in those days. Again, this all supports my hypothesis that historically there has been (and still is, to a lesser degree) an absence of Hindu tabla players in Fiji. It seems that many of the premier tabla teachers in Fiji have studied in India, and not exclusively obtained their knowledge of the instrument here on Fiji.

It should also be noted that because of this exodus for education, Hindustani, the religious music of North India, music is prevalent throughout the Fiji Islands. This is especially interesting to highlight as most of the ancestors of the Indo-Fijian population were from South India, where Carnatic – which is similar but not identical to Hindustani – music is dominant. For first-time listeners, the differences between Carnatic and Hindustani music can be subtle. That said, the most distinguishing distinction between the two musics is that Carnatic tends to be more composition-driven, whereas Hindustani embraces more improvisatorial techniques.

When we began discussing the religious element of the tabla, as always, I learned something that was a completely new prospect to me: the guru of Pandit Sanjesh Prasad (Somal's guru) was a man named Ustad Manju Khan Saheb, who, as you can tell by his name, was a Muslim. (Pandit is Hindi for master, and Ustad is Urdu for master). It was fascinating to hear that Somal's Hindu guru studied under a Muslim. I must admit that I have heard of Hindu and Muslim musicians interacting before (Ravi Shankar, a Hindu, had a tabla player who was a Muslim); but I have never encountered a difference in religion between the guru and the shishya (student).

When I inquired about the religious element to his studies, Somal responded that there is, “no direct spiritual training; but I do use my [musical] training in performing [religious] hymns.” There is not a clear-cut “religious” training, but rather, a much broader “spiritual” appreciation for music. Somal did affirm that, “Ten-percent of knowledge is from teaching; ninety-percent of knowledge is from ‘private’ knowledge. [...] Tabla creates its own mode [of being]; God will come.” For Somal, there is a sense of spirituality to his music: “You need divine grace from your guru to play tabla; you can’t just ‘learn’ it.”

To sum up the spiritual aspect of his studies, Somal stated: “Music is music; music is spiritual on its own. But you can incorporate it [to religion] to please God.”

To top off a great interview, as I was walking back on Gorrie Street (where I am staying), I watched the beating of a lali outside of a Seventh-Day Adventist church. So now, I feel very ready to leave Suva, as I have done a tremendous amount of research here. I would leave tomorrow, but Fiji is completely closed on Sundays.

As exciting has the past 48 hours have been, it was been a very mentally and physically taxing experience. I am now heading to the other big island, Vanua Levu, where I will spend five or six days in Indian town of Labasa (pronounced Lam-ba-sa) and Savusavu. Yes, I recognize that I am going from Suva to Savusavu; I’ve been wondering if in Fiji, dyslexia is much higher or lower than the norm.

---

### **September 11, 2007**

Yesterday, I arrived safely in Savusavu. The plane ride took about 45 minutes, and was the smallest plane I have ever taken: it was a three-seater, about five feet wide. It was so small that the pilot and co-pilot were touching shoulders. The flight itself was quite beautiful; having an aerial view of blue lagoons and massive reefs truly is a remarkable experience.

The population of Savusavu is just under five-thousand, split evenly between indigenous Fijians and Indo-Fijians. The main street (well, there really is only one “big street”) borders a bay, so there are many boats in the harbor. The surrounding area is very lush, and small mountains envelope the town itself.

This evening, I attended a Hindu puja, held by a group called Sathsang Ramayan Mandal. The service was actually not in a temple, but instead on the front porch of someone’s house – there were about thirty people of all ages. Because the group is not directly associated with a temple, it was interesting to observe a much less conservative Hindu religious service.

I arrived after the service had started, but that did not seem to be a problem. The music ensemble consisted of a harmonium player, two finger cymbal players, one man playing the tambourine, one man playing the dandal (a long metal rod hit with a metal horseshoe type thing – it was new to me), and another playing two dholak drums. The dholak sounds similar to the tabla, but is very different: the dholak is much longer, constructed of wood and goatskin, and can be played on either side.

While the music was playing, one man was reading a religious scripture: from my elementary knowledge of Hindi, I was able to recognize that he was reading from the great Hindu epic the Ramayana. (I kept on hearing the names Ravan and Sita, so I knew this had to be the case).

At the conclusion of the service, I spoke with several people, including the dholak player, a man named Shree Niwasan. He has lived in Savusavu his entire life, but his ancestors came from Madras (Chennai), where I will be basing my research while in India.

When I asked whether it was the Ramayana that was read from, he said yes, and that the Ramayana is the primary text used in their services. Shree Niwasan then informed me that the musicians learn specific parts to specific paragraphs of the Ramayana – called a

doha. He has been playing the dholak for about 25 years; and has had formal training. He said he first learned to play by banging on “plastic drum gallons,” which are like shallow buckets, I think.

I was curious as to why a dholak was used in the service, and not the tabla. Shree Niwasan explained that there are five types of Hindu music: bajaan, kerten, ghazel, sangeet, and qawwali (which I had always thought was exclusively Muslim). Bajaan and kerten are the musical accompaniment to weekly readings of texts like the Ramayana; and they never employ the tabla. The tabla is only utilized in the other three genres.

In regards to the dholak, Shree Niwasan said that there are crafters here in Fiji, and I should be able to encounter one in Labasa. But, he also maintained that most dholaks are imported from India.

Without a doubt, there was an element of spirituality to the musical performance. When we were discussing different types of music, Shree Niwasan stated: “Music is diverse because God is diverse.” As a musician, Shree Niwasan felt a certain connection to the Divine through his music, as he avowed, “God only needs love from us; the love comes through music.”

There was a definite Fijian influence to both the music and service itself. First, in addition to the other instruments listed above, every so often, one man would play a conch shell. Clearly, this is a Hindu Indo-Fijian practice: Hindus in Northern India do not employ this instrument in their religious services.

As the service was ended, the women left, while the men drank grog. Grog, made from the kava root, is an essential aspect of the social life in Fiji, and various other countries in the South Pacific. While grog is not alcohol, it is a mild narcotic: this is important to recognize, as many Hindu Indians abstain from all drugs and alcohol, especially during a religious service. So between the conch shell trumpet and grog drinking, this was a distinctly Hindu Indo-Fijian service.

The service lasted about an hour-and-a-half; and then we drank grog, with music still playing on, for another hour-and-a-half. It was great way to end the day.

---

### **September 12, 2007**

This morning, I took the 9:30am bus from Savusavu to Labasa. Taking just under three hours, the ride was quite pleasant, as I was able to see the countryside of Vanua Levu. Perhaps the strangest part of the journey was when the bus drove through a massive pine tree forest: I would assume that pine trees are not indigenous, and have been introduced to Fiji for logging purposes. It was very awkward seeing pine trees next to palm trees.

After checking into my hotel, I began to explore Labasa. (Regarding the hotel, I am staying in the “dormitory,” but I am the only one here. In fact, I think I am the only guest in the entire place). Labasa is predominately Indo-Fijian; and the town reflects this, as there are many temples and mosques. During the service I attended on Tuesday night in Savusavu, I was told that there are, in fact, Indo-Fijian dholak crafters in Labasa; so, I set out to find one.

To my knowledge, there are three main music shops in Labasa: South Pacific Recording Music & HiFi, Sharma Music Centre, and Rohit’s South Pacific Music Center. I had seen both SPR and Sharma stores in Suva; so those two represent the “major” chain music shops here in Fiji.

SPR did not have any locally made dholaks; but they have a whole slew of Indian-imported ones, some as expensive as F\$590. To my surprise, the Sharma Music Centre actually did a handful of locally crafted dholaks, all selling for F\$125. I spoke to the shopkeeper Dinesh, a Hindu, and he said that Sharma has crafters in Nadi. He emphasized that the locally crafted dholaks are much lower quality (and much less expensive) than the Indian crafted dholaks. When comparing the two instruments, it was

clear that the Fijian made dholaks were not very nice. I passed on buying one just for the sake of buying one.

Rohit's South Pacific Music Center is owned and operated by a man named Rohit Sagadeooan (I might be misspelling that). Rohit does not sell Fijian made dholaks but did give me the name of local crafter, a man by the name of Lalta Ram. Rohit did not have Lalta's phone number, so he suggested that I look it up in the Yellow Pages.

The funny thing about looking up the last name "Ram" in Fiji: pages 504 to 510 all include individuals with that last name. There were about a dozen or so Lalta Ram's, so that was not much help. I went back to Rohit for some advice of how to contact the Lalta Ram I was looking for, and he then gave me the number of Lalta's neighbor, a woman named Maya Munappa.

I called Maya, explained my situation, and then took a taxi over to her house. She lives in Siberia, a district of Labasa on the outskirts of the town. It was long and winding dirt road to her house; but it was in a very beautiful location, just at the foothills of the Three Sisters mountains. Maya, her father, and I talked for about twenty minutes and then Maya brought me over to Lalta's home.

Lalta, a slender man in his late fifties, did not speak English: fortunately, Maya was more than willing to serve as my translator. Lalta's wife also was there, and she helped bridge the communication gap between Lalta and myself.

After explaining my research, I asked if it would be possible to purchase one of Lalta's dholaks. He said of course, but that he did not have any finished ones. This worked to my advantage: I was able to watch Lalta complete the construction of a dholak that I picked out from a group of four or five that he was still working on. It was really neat to see the craftsman in action: I took a ton of photographs and also a couple short videos.

The wooden shell of the dholak already was completed (sanded and lacquered, that is): the heads of the drum still needed to be set to the drum, though. Both sides of the dholak are played, but are different sizes to create different sounds. To prepare one of the drumheads, Lalta reinforced the inner-side of the head with a black, tar-like goo. When I asked what that substance was, I was told that one (in the red tin, in the picture) was called “rito,” which is the ash of a burned tire; and, the other (in the yellow tin) was “loban,” an automotive grease. I will post a video of Lalta mixing these two substances, and then rubbing the combination onto the drumhead.

The wood used for the drum is from a “sirsa” tree (they were unsure of the English equivalent), which is a local tree. Lalta said that he has experimented with thirteen different types of timber before he found the perfect one. He noted that the harder the timber, the better the sound of the drum. He did say that he has built drums from both palm and mango trees before; a very Indo-Fijian prospect. The heads of the drum are made from goatskin that first is soaked in water with “chuna” powder (limesalt; not sure what that is though) to remove the goat hair. All in all, Lalta says building a dholak only takes one day of work; I would have thought it would have been a much more extensive process.

Lalta has been building drums for thirty-six years. He is a craftsman by trade; constructing drums, cabinets, tables and other such general items. Lalta learned how to build a drum from his father, who had been a carpenter. His father had taught himself how to craft drums during the 1960s. When I asked where in India his ancestors were from, he responded that he did not know, as it was too long ago.

Lalta says he makes dholaks for “thousands of temples” throughout Fiji. He did say he has never crafted tablas, but has repaired them before. In regards to the religious element to the drum crafting, Lalta asserted that before the construction begins, he says a special prayer. Further, upon the completion of the drum, decorations, like marigolds, are placed on and around the drum, almost as if it were a statue of a god.

The drum itself only cost F\$80; much cheaper than the lower quality ones in town. Discount aside, the invaluable experience of watching a craftsman at work, and having the opportunity to interview the crafter of my drum, truly was a fantastic experience. I came to Labasa for this very prospect, and it is so great that it came to fruition.

I must admit that none of this would have been possible without the assistance of Maya. From introducing me to Lalta to translating for me, she really was the reason this excellent day happened.

If that weren't enough, Maya invited me to stay for dinner. I actually was with her and her family (husband and 14-year-old son) from about 2pm to 10:30pm. She says I now have an Indo-Fijian mother! Another ridiculously great day for the books...

---

### **September 16, 2007**

Yesterday, I flew from Savusavu back to Suva. My old friend Jiten picked me up at the airport and drove me to the bus station, so that I could catch a bus to Lautoka. Packed like sardines in a tin, the bus ride took just over four hours. Driving along the southern Coral Coast was beautiful indeed, especially since I had not yet seen the south or the west of Viti Levu. I am currently staying in a dormitory, but am not sure how much longer I will remain in Lautoka.

This morning, I went to the Hare Krishna Temple (ISKCON, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness), because I had read that the Sunday service was laden with music. The West is familiar with ISKCON because, in the late 1960s, George Harrison became one of the primary financial backers of organization – although, later in his life, he distanced himself from the Hare Krishna movement. To be completely honest, I have had my share of run-ins with Hare Krishna devotees in New York City; often with them being rather aggressive when asking for a donation.

I arrived at the temple at around 10:15am and found myself to be the only one there, besides the priest! Although no one was in the temple before I arrived, the priest was still diligently reading through a scripture, while playing the finger cymbals. The sermon was from the Bhagavad-Gita, and mostly was sung. The priest was facing the three statues of Sri Gaura Nitai, Sri Krishna Kaliya, and Sri Radha Govindji; I am not sure whether he was doing this so that he was singing his prays directly to the gods, or simply because no one was there to listen to the service – I would assume the former explanation to be the reason.

After about hour, the service concluded. I was told to return in the afternoon for another, larger service. When I returned at 12:30pm, the temple was packed – it seems that the Fijian “coconut time” has an influence on when Indo-Fijians attend their Sunday services!

This service, which was about 75 minutes, was much, much more interesting: the temple was divided with men on the left-hand side, and women on the right. There was singing and dancing throughout the bulk of service. Interestingly enough, only the men dance. And yes, the Hare Krishna mantra, “Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare, Hare Rama, Rama Rama” was sung (over and over again, I might add).

Throughout the singing, several of the men played finger or hand cymbals, in addition to two drummers, on two different types of drum. I was unfamiliar with both drums: both were a similar shape, but one was electric blue, and the other was sort of like a dholak, but with a much more intricate tuning system.

After the service, I spoke with one of the drummers, a man in his early 30s named Rohinisuta Das. When I inquired about the drums, he informed that the blue one is called a balaram, and other one is called mirdanga, or mirdangum. The shell of the balaram is made from fiberglass, and the skins are just a basic plastic. He told me that to tune the balaram, it requires an Allen wrench. I had never seen such a modernized Indian drum

before; in truth, it was a little strange, and I don't like the idea of using an Allen wrench to tune a hand drum.

The mirdanga (which he spelt "mrdanga") is a more natural drum: the shell is made from clay, and the heads are made from ox skin. As I mentioned before, that drum had a fairly complex tuning system: there were countless cords connecting the two sides of the drums together. Rohinisuta told me that in order to tune the mirdanga, you just pull the cords; but this is only done, "once a season."

When I asked Rohinisuta about his personal training, he said that he did not formally study, but rather, "learned through association." He said, "The best way to learn is to listen to a good player." Once again, it seems that within the Hindu Indo-Fijian community, there is not much of a formalized system of musical training.

After the service, I was invited to "the feast," which was very nice. It was a basic Indian lunch of rice, daal, and curried potatoes. It was interesting because I noticed some indigenous Fijians at the meal, although they had not attended the service. I began to realize the effect of a religious institution on the greater community: especially with the ethnic tensions throughout the country, it was nice to see indigenous Fijians and Indo-Fijians come together.

This warm, fuzzy feeling quickly disappeared, as I left the dining hall to find that my sandals had been stolen. With the help of Rohinisuta, I searched for a while, but to no avail. He said that it was probably one of the indigenous Fijians that had come for the free lunch, and then annexed my sandals. It's not a big deal, it was only a pair of sandals, but I must admit that the walk back to my hostel was terrible! The ground was very hot and pointy!

Lastly, I did not take any photographs during the service, because I always feel reluctant to photograph, film or record without direct permission.

---

### **September 18, 2007**

After spending the past month in Suva, Kadavu, Savusavu, Labasa and Lautoka, I now have returned to where I started: Nadi, the international hub of Fiji, which is the third-largest city of the Fiji Islands. The city is quite small, with only one main street (called, yup you guessed it, Main Street).

The music scene in Nadi is similar to that of Suva: both cities have the same music/record shops, Sharma, South Pacific Recording, and Procera. Truth be told, Nadi does not offer much of interest in regards to the indigenous Fijian music. Yet, like so many other of my experiences here in Fiji, it has been very interesting learning about the Indo-Fijian music community in Nadi.

The largest Hindu temple in the South Pacific is in Nadi. The color scheme of the temple truly is extraordinary: vibrant reds, pinks, oranges, yellows, greens, purples, and blues fill the exterior and interior of the temple. Even in my time in India, I had never seen a temple with such a flamboyant ensemble of colors. There are countless statues integrated into the temple's façade. Surely, this simple description does not do it justice; therefore, I will post photos as soon as possible.

For about two hours, I spoke with Reddi, the grounds manager of the temple. He told me that the temple was built in 1994; and is modeled after of a temple in South India – Reddi asserted that the one in India is “twenty times larger.” It is a Shaivite temple; thus there are many statues of Lord Shiva. Reddi did say that the temple actually is for “Lord Shiva's son, Sri Subra Manyan.” When I confessed that I was not familiar with that deity, he then said, “It is just one of the 108 names of Lord Shiva.”

Knowing that South Indian temples tend to be much more colorful than those of the North, I asked if the colors signified anything specific, and Reddi told me that, “The colors are [represent] the seven stages of Enlightenment.”

There were paintings all over the ceiling of the temple. While all of the art work was very similar to temple art in India, there was one painting that demonstrated the Fijian influence: it depicted Lord Shiva blowing on a conch, while standing next to Sarasvati, the Goddess of Music. I might be wrong, but I would think that the idea of a conch shell trumpet is result of the Fijian influence on Hinduism.

I inquired about whether the temple commissioned any musicians, and Reddi said no. At this point in my research, this answer does not surprise me. Before I began my research, however, I would have assumed that the largest Hindu temple in Fiji would employ musicians. When I asked what does the temple do for music for major holidays and festivals, Reddi informed that sometimes musicians are flown in from India. He said that only happens during very special occasion, but I was still amazed to hear that. Reddi said that last year, twenty-one musicians from India came to perform at the twelfth anniversary of the temple's opening.

After we began our conversation on the music of Hinduism, Reddi then showed me one of the stranger things I have encountered here in Fiji. On the right-hand side of the main entrance of the temple, there is an old-fashioned drum machine. An inscription above the machine reads, "Dum Dum Music Drum." There is one medium-sized, bowl-shaped drum, made of copper shell, with an animal hide drumhead. It is probably about 14" in diameter. There are two large wooden sticks – although it's almost fair to call them "mallets" and not "sticks." Above the sticks, there are two brass bells. The bells and sticks are powered by a blue-colored belt motor; the machine itself is painted a faded orange.

Reddi plugged in the Dum Dum Music Drum, and it was very loud and played a very fast rhythm. It was a strange contraption indeed; and oddly enough, reconfirmed much of research on the music of Hindu Indo-Fijians. To clarify, it seems that if there were plethora of Hindu drummers in Fiji, such a machine would not be necessary. The lack of formal training of percussion instruments of Hindustani music has required Hindu Indo-

Fijians to develop innovative ways to fill that void. All that being said, it was really cool to see such a peculiar invention.

---

### **FINAL REFLECTIONS ON THE FIJI ISLANDS**

I still cannot believe how quickly my time in Fiji has slipped away. The truth is that I have had so many experiences, met so many people, seen so many different parts of the islands, that it does seem like I have been here for ages. All that being said, I am in a state of disbelief that the time in Fiji is now over.

Many of my discoveries here have been very refreshing: I actually am happy that much of my field research has contradicted my initial hypotheses prior to arriving in Fiji. I would like to share some of my concluding thoughts of my research; please bear in mind that I have written about all of this before, and that is just a condensed version of my findings in Fiji...

The most valuable hypothesis that I have formed is that, when the first Indian indentured servants came to Fiji in the mid-1800s, almost none of them were formally trained Hindustani or Carnatic musicians or instrument craftsmen; let alone percussionists or drum crafters. This theory is derived from the fact that the conception of the Hindustani or Carnatic music within the Indo-Fijian community greatly differs from that of the Hindustani or Carnatic back in India. Traditionally, musicians and instrument crafters are commissioned by a temple: thus, their art/craft is spiritually pure, and represents an integral aspect of religious rituals of Hinduism. The logic remains that in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, why would a Hindu musician or instrument crafter – both professions that have relatively high social standings – desire to leave his homeland of India to work slave-labor in a cotton field or on sugar plantation in Fiji? Of course, to my knowledge, there are no concrete records that detail the castes and former professions of the Indian indentured servants that came to Fiji; but, it is fair to assume that most of these individuals were of the lowest, or even untouchable, caste. Therefore, due to their low social ranking, these individuals could never be included in the strict hierarchy of the

music of Hinduism: religious music is “pure,” and an “impure” individual could never have a part of it. In the mind of a traditionalist Hindu, how could a Daalit – a second-class citizen – even set foot in the temple, let alone play the instruments that connect man with the Divine?

I continually draw upon this hypothesis to explain the sheer lack of Hindu Indo-Fijian drum crafters; and, to justify why I did not meet a single second-generation Hindu Indo-Fijian musician. Again, bear in mind that in India, the trade of music is passed down from father to son; generally speaking, only individuals with a familial history of performing study Hindustani music.

In regards to the indigenous drumming of Fijian music, due to the influence of Christianity, the traditional usage of the lali and other percussion instruments is now a lost art. Sure, the lali is still beaten to announce the beginning of a church service, and even in the meke (traditional dance) performances, but it is not as a dominant aspect of Fijian music as it once was. Furthermore, although I unfortunately was unable to interview a lali crafter in Suva, I learned that many Indo-Fijians have become lali crafters: this would contradict the idea that the lali is a unique aspect of the indigenous Fijian culture. Why have Indo-Fijians absorbed this trade? Is it merely because that it is a solid way to earn a livelihood for the Indo-Fijians, or is there a greater cultural shift of indifference to the lali of the indigenous Fijians?

It is interesting to draw parallels between the Indo-Fijian and indigenous Fijian forms of music: each seems to have strayed greatly from its respective heritage. Without a doubt, there is nothing inherently wrong with that prospect; but, it is a curious commonality nonetheless.

Because the vast majority of my research pertained to the music of Hinduism, I am very eager to go to India. It should be really interesting to compare my findings on the Hindu Indo-Fijian drummers and drum crafters to that of the Hindu Indians I will meet. I do

wish that India were my next destination for these very reasons; yet, to due restrictions on my around-the-world ticket, Japan had to be next.

Although I am sad to leave, I fully recognize that if I had another week or month here, there would not be much to do, in regards to my research. I will miss this place; very few places in the world still run on “coconut time.”

////////////////////////////////////

## **PART TWO: JAPAN**

### **October 6, 2007**

Konnichwa. Tonight, I leave for Tokyo. I am very excited to begin my adventure in Japan. From the original conception of this fellowship, I always anticipated that the research in Japan would be the most difficult to conduct, dually because of the obvious language barrier, but almost more so because of the rich drum and percussion history of the Japanese culture.

As of now, after my arrival in Japan, I plan to spend just a few days in Tokyo. There are two points of interest: the Miyamoto Unosuke Shoten, a massive store described as, “an Aladdin’s cave of traditional [Japanese] percussion instruments,” and the Drum Museum, which, not surprisingly, has the largest collection of drums in all of Japan.

On Thursday the 11<sup>th</sup>, I will take a train from Tokyo to Kyoto. Over the past several months, I have established a fabulous contact at the University of Kyoto, Noriko Fuku: she has been tremendously helpful in coordinating my itinerary for Japan. I actually can’t imagine where I would be without her right now – Noriko, if you are reading this, thank you SO much!!!

For my duration in Kyoto, I will be staying with several of Noriko’s students: for the first week, I will be living with a student named Rei, who has a grandmother that lives on

Sado Island. Sado Island is where the Kodo drummers are from; and I will venture up to Sado for the obvious reasons! Also, while in Kyoto, I will be staying with another of Noriko's student, Nobutaka – Nobutaka and his mother live in a local temple; so that should be an amazing experience. Again, I am so grateful that Noriko has created all of these wonderful research opportunities.

As for the rest of my time in Japan, in late November and the first three weeks of December, the Kodo drummers are doing a national tour, so I will see as many performances as possible. I already purchased a rail pass to make my travels easier.

---

**October 8, 2007**

I am in Tokyo until Thursday (and then I take off for Kyoto): on Monday and Wednesday, I will go to the Drum Museum and the largest traditional Japanese drum and percussion shop in the country; so, I thought that I would just explore Asakusa (Northern Tokyo) this afternoon (Sunday).

As I was wandering around, I stumbled upon a four-story drum and percussion shop called Komaki Music: the Japanese Percussion Center. The store is divided amongst four floors: in the basement there is a room for drum clinics; above that, "Drum City," which has an impressive selection of Western drum kits, snares, cymbals, sticks, and other accessories; on the next floor, "Ethnic City," which houses a diverse range of drums from all around the world; and on the top floor, "Percussion City," which has a mix of traditional Japanese and Western orchestra percussion instruments.

While at Komaki Music, I began to understand something that I probably should have realized a long time ago: music is without boundaries. Sure, every culture produces a unique genre of music, and thus, unique instruments; nonetheless, because music knows no limits, it disregards all borders.

Music is something to be shared: the celebration of music can only truly begin with the unwavering dissemination of it. Furthermore, the labels and characterizations of different genres of music made by Western academia often are misleading and, more importantly, unnecessary. Such classifications constrict the true colors of music: this prospect goes against everything music represents – universality. Music is for everyone.

Without a doubt, I always have known that music is a universal enterprise; nonetheless, this concept was fully reinforced when I saw the diverse collection of drum and percussion instruments in Komaki Music.

For some reason, I had anticipated that I would be exclusively researching taiko (traditional Japanese drumming): now, I realize that while in Japan, I may very well encounter “foreign” drums and schools of percussion. I am unsure why had rejected the prospect of foreign influence on Japanese drumming – especially, since the vast majority of my research in Fiji focused on a “foreign” (Indian) influence.

I write this tangent because at Komaki Music I purchased, “Percussion Magazine,” a Japanese music magazine that focuses on percussion instruments from all around the world. There are countless pictures of various African, Brazilian and Indian drums: some of these pictures even show Japanese musicians playing those “foreign” instruments. The embracement of these international instruments by Japanese musicians spawned my former revelation.

---

**October 9, 2007**

Yesterday, I visited the Miyamoto Japanese Percussion and Festival Store in western Asakusa. While I was still searching for the store, I realized that it was in same neighborhood as the Japanese Percussion Center – I began to worry that maybe the two stores were in fact the same store, because, I thought, what were the odds that there were two multi-floor percussion shops in same neighborhood? (Please note that the vast majority of streets in Tokyo do not have names; thus, navigating around the city can be

quite difficult. The truth is that even if there consistently were street signs, I couldn't read them anyways). As it turns out Miyamoto and the JPC are two blocks from one another.

Entering Miyamoto, you are engulfed in a sea of traditional drums, which are all scattered around with an assortment of festival paraphernalia. Just as JPC had a wide array of international percussion instruments, Miyamoto had a diverse collection of Japanese drums, the bulk of which I never seen or heard before! Most of the drums were nagado daiko drums; the standard drum of taiko. (Just so you know, "taiko" and "daiko" are the same thing: just like "Taoism" is pronounced with a D-sound, and therefore sometimes spelt "Daoism"). All of the drums were made from natural materials: finished wood for the shell and animal-hide for the heads. There also was a modest collection of brass hand cymbals.

Something I noticed about the drums was that there are several different types of drum heads and ways to fasten the head to the drum. Some heads fit perfectly on the drum, like any normal Western drum; yet, some were (intentionally) much larger than the shell of the drum – making the drum almost look like a mushroom. Furthermore, there were three different means of securing the head to the drum: tying ropes from the top head to the bottom head, in a manner very similar to the Indian dholak; using metal lugs and bolts to secure the head, almost like Western snare drums; and most commonly, particularly with the nagado daiko drums, stapling the heads with a semi-circle bolt. I am not sure how a nagado daiko would be tuned, since the head seems almost irremovable from the drum.

Another neat aspect of Miyamoto was the collection of drumsticks. Unlike Western drumsticks that have a definitive top and bottom of the stick, the taiko sticks are evenly shaped. The range of the stick size was extremely impressive, varying from (length/width) 32cm/18mm to 63cm/55mm. (I'm not on the metric system either, so just imagine a really small thin stick almost like a long pencil to a decent-sized tree branch). There was even one kind of stick that was flat and only about a quarter inch wide, but almost three feet long!

The drums ranged in price, anywhere from about ¥10,000 to ¥700,000 (that's like \$85 to \$6,000). In their catalogue, I even saw a drum for ¥1,995,000 – about \$18,000! So, needless to say, I refrained from purchasing one. I figure that Sado Island should provide ample opportunity for that. Also, like my experience in Fiji, I want to witness the crafting of my drum, so I know its history.

After I visit the Drum Museum – which is above Miyamoto – tomorrow and learn more about what I saw in the shop, I will write more in detail about all of these Japanese drums. Unfortunately, no one spoke English at the shop. This, of course, was frustrating; yet, just by studying the drums themselves, I was able to learn a lot. There were instructional books of how to play the different drums, but they were all in Japanese. I spent almost two hours in Miyamoto. It was kind of like being in Japanese drum heaven.

---

### **October 10, 2007**

Today, I returned to the Miyamoto Japanese Percussion & Festival Shop to visit the Drum Museum, which is on the top floor of the shop. The museum was founded in 1988, and is financed by the store. Miyamoto Unosuke Shoten, a drum crafter from Tokyo (then called Edo), founded the shop in 1861. The museum itself is rather small: it is only one room that is probably about a thousand square feet. Despite its modest size, the museum is teeming with drums from all corners of the world. On the introductory plaque at the museum reads, “These drums were collected with the aim of fostering an appreciation for the role they have played in different cultures around the world.”

The wealth of drums is not limited to Japanese percussion: in fact, there are more international drums than Japanese drums. (Although, naturally, there are more drums from Japan than any other individual country). There is a diverse representation of drums from around the world, including, but not limited to: Zaire, Ivory Coast, Angola, Trinidad & Tobago, Iran, India, Egypt, Iraq, Morocco, Tibet, Ireland, Haiti, Papua New Guinea, Indonesia, China, Korea, Mexico, Peru, and Greenland. This list is not complete; so

imagine drums from all these countries (most countries had more than one drum on display), plus many other countries, in one room. It was a pretty special sight. I sincerely doubt that there is another room anywhere else in the rest of the world that has such a diverse and extensive collection of drums!

The Drum Museum is even interactive: some drums on display you can play. Shortly after I entered the museum, the curator came in with two pairs of thick taiko sticks. She demonstrated a traditional taiko beat for me, and then had me follow her lead. Then, one of us would continue with that set beat, and the other would play an improvisation. We only played for a couple of minutes, but I am proud to say that I have played my first taiko drum! It is really wonderful that the museum is interactive: as a drummer, it would be difficult to see all of these great drums and not be able to play some of them!

Another fantastic aspect of the Drum Museum is that there is background information, in English, on almost all of the drums, detailing the crafting technique and broader cultural (or religious) implication of the drum. Without a doubt, this made it a much richer experience.

As there are over three hundred percussion instruments in the museum, there is no way I can write about everything I saw. I did, however, take notes on all of the Japanese drums on display, and also my favorite international drums.

Of the international collection, I had three definite favorite ones. First, was the senufo drum from the Ivory Coast. This drum is made from a hippopotamus' foot, and is used for coming-of-age ceremonies. There was another variation of the senufo drum that had a wooden carving of a woman with her hands raised holding the drum, and thus acting as a stand for the drum. Second, was the tromme, a small drum from Greenland, made from driftwood and a walrus' stomach. Shamans would play this drum in while reciting their daily prayers. Last, and most certainly not least, was the damaru rnga-chun from Tibet. Hands down, this is the strangest drum I have ever seen or heard of; and not because of its physical appearance or actual sound it makes, but rather for what it is crafted from.

The damaru rnga-chun is made from a human skull and human skin. (I probably should have put a disclaimer at the start of this paragraph). In ancient Tibet, the damaru rnga-chun was revered as a sacred object, and used in ceremonies to pray for the physical well-being of others.

Another point of interest from the international drum collection was the African slit drum, which was almost identical to the Fijian lali: I would be very curious to find out if there is a direct connection between the two drums, or if it is just coincidental that the two drums appear the same.

There were at least eight or nine different types of drums from Morocco; but, I'll write about those in a couple of months! Also, there were about a half-dozen different types of steel drums from Trinidad. According to the museum, "In the late 1930s, it was feared that the natives of American descent were using the [steel] drums for secret messages so they were outlawed." I'll have to investigate that next summer...

In total, I counted twenty-four different types of Japanese drums; and for many of these unique drums, there were multiple variations, such as size and style. As much as I would like to write about each drum (I have detailed notes on all of them), I am not sure if that would be worth it. So, instead, I will write about a handful of my favorite ones:

There is a tremendous range of taiko drums, with differences in size, shape, type of head, and overall design. Taiko drums can have two types of heads: either tying the heads to one another with rope, or bolting each head directly onto the shell of the drum. On one plaque, it was noted that, "An aim for making the drum is to simplify the tuning process." In all honesty, I would think that pulling on a rope would be the easier tuning technique, as tuning the bolts requires using a hammer. Then again, more taiko drumheads are secured with bolts than rope, so maybe the tuning is not that difficult after all.

Depending on the type of drum, the thickness of the drum skin (the head) varies: the thinnest is called namituske, and the thickest, gochogake. The drum skins always are

thicker in the front than the back. The skin itself is made from horse, ox or cow. The shell of the drum almost always is made from zelkova wood, which is a type of elm tree. There were a couple of clay drums as well.

The shimedaiko is largest taiko drum: it is absolutely huge and indeed sounds very overpowering. You probably have all seen this drum before – it is the classic massive Japanese drum. The drum is so large it, “uses a special stand to keep it off the floor.” Perhaps like the instruments of Hindustani music, the shimedaiko has a sacred value and therefore must always be above the ground. Players use bachi sticks, which are very long and made from bamboo.

The nagado-daiko is the standard drum of traditional Japanese music. It is crafted from zelkova wood and ox hide. They are fairly large drums, somewhere in between a Western floor tom and bass drum. One interesting note about the nagado-daiko is that it is tax exempt, as it is most commonly used in Buddhist and Shinto temples.

Although it is not a drum of any real religious significance, the social implications of the ameya daiko are pretty neat. “Ameya” means candyseller, and back in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, candysellers would play this drum, while dancing and singing to attract customers. The first seller to do so was a man named Hanzaburo Kyokueho, who would walk, play and sing all around Tokyo. The drum is rather thin, and is somewhat reminiscent of a large tambourine without the cymbals. The ox hide head is bolted onto the wooden shell. So, from this initial candyseller/drummer, an entire genre of performance was created, called, “ameyagei,” candyseller’s entertainment.

Another drum that has an interesting non-religious history is the yokyu daiko. This drum is a perfect rectangle, which, of course, is an odd shape for a drum. The yokyu daiko was used for archery; it would be placed directly behind the target, and, “If you hit the target, a clean ‘kachiri’ sound [would occur]; if you miss and hit the drum, a thudding ‘don.’” Makes me want to take up archery!

There were several drums that are instrumental to various religious services and practices. The uchiwa daiko is a thin drum made from ox hide that is connected to the handle; so it almost looks like an oversized ping-pong paddle. According to the plaque, “Nichiren sectarians beat it when they recite their bible, since the Kamakura period.” It should be noted that Nichiren is a school of Buddhism; the term “bible” is used here in the general sense.

The himojime nagado daiko is used for folk music from Shinshu, in central Japan. This drum drew my interest because it is remarkably similar to the Indian dholak. I am unsure of its exact roots, but I would not be surprised if it is, in fact, directly modeled after the dholak. If Buddhism, an Indian religion, made it all the way to Japan, it is also possible that the dholak did as well.

The paranku, and its larger cousin the okinawa taiko, are both an intricate part of various Buddhist rituals and prayers. The drums themselves are similar to the nagado taiko, but not nearly as deep. Historically, these drums were used to praise the spirits of deceased ancestors. Specifically, the participants would ask Amida Buddha to guide the spirits of their ancestors to heaven. (I recognize that this does not sync up with the “normal” tenets of Buddhism; but, as we all know, religion is never consistent).

Without a doubt, the most beautiful drum was the kaen daiko: there were three variations of this drum, and each was absolutely breathtaking. The drums are hand-painted with gold, red, blue, green and black: there are either wooden carvings or paintings of dragons on the head or the drum itself. These drums are used in various Buddhist rituals and ceremonies. The drums were actually only one-eighth of their normal size; and even so, they were good-sized drums!

There were so many other Japanese and international drums that I could write about, but I'd be surprised if anyone is still reading this right now!

My only qualm about the Drum Museum is that photography is prohibited. I recognize and respect their rules; yet, especially since the closing line of the mission statement of the museum affirms, “We hope that the Drum Museum will promote understanding, research, and love for drums,” I do not agree with the no-photography rule. I understand that flash photograph may damage the drums over time; but, I really feel that it is such a wonderful place, it should be shared. I feel bad that I have all these descriptions, but almost no pictures!

In broken English, the curator told me that she could take pictures of me in front of the drums, but I could not take any of just the drums. I guess you will all have to come to Tokyo someday to see it for yourself. It’s worth the trip, I promise!

I spent almost three hours in this one room, to ensure that I digested everything there was to see. I will leave you with this quotation from the introductory plaque at the museum: “Between man and God, and among men, these drums of the world have served as a means of communication.” Sounds like my research in a nutshell...

---

**October 12, 2007**

I am Kyoto right now; I arrived yesterday afternoon. I am staying with one of Noriko's students, Rei. It has been a really incredible opportunity to live with a local. There are many temples I want to visit, so I think I will do some temple-hopping this weekend.

Yesterday, I visited Noriko and her students at the university. Next week, I will be staying with Nobu, who lives at a temple near the university. Nobu is a musician, and in the late afternoon, we went to a music studio on campus and jammed for a bit, myself on drum kit, and Nobu switching among the bass, acoustic guitar and djembe. It was really fun, and I’m sure we will be playing more while I am in Kyoto.

---

**October 14, 2007**

On Sunday evening, one of Noriko's assistants, Yuki, took me to a traditional Ainu music performance. The Ainu are the indigenous people of Japan, mostly from Hokkaido, the northern island. Today, they are a minority, with only about 150,000 Ainu remaining.

Traditionally, the Ainu people sing and dance to entertain the gods. In this performance, the myth of the origin of the god of fire was sung. After doing some research, I have learned that within the Ainu belief system, according to scholar Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney, "the musical instruments are said to be imbued with souls." In general, the religion of the Ainu people is animist – that everything, animate or not, has a soul.

There were three musicians, two men and a woman. The performance was interactive: at one point, the female singer taught the crowd a verse and had everyone sing in unison. This reflects the fact that typical Ainu music performances are an experience for the entire community.

The choice of instruments was very interesting, ranging from a tonkori (a stringed instrument of the Ainu people), an open-faced drum of the Ainu people (about 16" in diameter), a djembe (Western African large hand drum), a goblet drum (North African medium-sized hand drum), a xylophone, and a violin.

The Ainu drum (I am unsure of its name, unfortunately) was an especially beautiful drum: there was an abstract pattern of people around the drum – although, it should be noted that the sound of the drum was not extraordinary.

The performance highlights the general interconnectedness of music, religious or not. The synthesis of Eastern and Western instruments is a very interesting concept: to a varying degree, fusion music is apparent in almost every culture. Nonetheless, in a religious context, the hybridization of Japanese (Ainu), Western and African instruments is a very progressive prospect. For me, it is so interesting to observe the indigenous Ainu musicians perform religious music on non-traditional (Western and African) instruments.

One would think that Ainu music would be performed entirely on the instruments of the Ainu people; or at the very least, on Japanese instruments.

---

### **October 16, 2007**

Last night, I attended a taiko practice at the University of Kyoto of Art & Design. Noriko Fuku, my primary contact in Kyoto, introduced me to Yoshimi Takagi, the director of the taiko program at the university. Professor Takagi is a celebrated taiko performer herself: after watching she indeed is a fantastic player. In the past, she has taught several Kodo drummers – the most famous Japanese drumming group. Interestingly enough, next April, Professor Takagi and her sister are performing a duet of taiko and classical piano: this has never been done before. I'm sorry I will miss it, as I will have left Japan by then.

For almost three hours, I watched the taiko practice. There were three distinctive parts: first, the students performed about seven or eight pieces; second, Professor Takagi and her assistant gave various instruction and performance tips to the students; and lastly, the professor and her taiko group, Shien, rehearsed for an upcoming show. A random side note: Professor Takagi's husband, Noda Satoru, is one of the members of Shien.

The student performances were really great: the students have been studying taiko anywhere from six months to four years. There were about 35 students in all. At least half of the students were female. The number of participants in each performance varied, ranging from five to twenty-five students playing at a time.

There were several different kinds of taiko drums used: nagado taiko, shimetaiko and oketaiko. The nagado taiko is the classical sounding drum; a very full sound indeed. The shimetaiko is almost like a tightly-tuned snared drum: it has a distinctive high-pitched sound.

There are two types of shimetaiko drums; one that is tuned with ropes, and another that is tuned with thick metal lugs and bolts. The shimetaiko drums with the metal lugs are

much easier to tune, but this extra hardware makes the drum much heavier and much less aesthetically pleasing. The oketaiko almost looks like a marching drum: it has a strap so the performer can move around with ease. In the videos, it is the glossy black drum with purple ropes. In addition to the drums, for some of the performances, there was the occasional hand cymbal player and flutist.

Watching the almost-flawless technique of the performers was a very special experience. Because the auditorium is solid concrete, the whole room shakes with the booming of the drums. Even though I was attending a practice and not a formal performance, the quality of the music was still excellent. The perfection of the motions of the drummers was remarkable: they were always in unison, in perfect posture. I also thoroughly enjoyed watching the “dancing” element of the performances. Taiko drumming is an art that exerts the entire body.

After the class was over, Professor Takagi performed with several of the more accomplished students. The highlight of the evening was when the professor, her assistant and one other player performed on the oketaiko drums. It should be noted that they were performing original music. In regards the spiritual element of her music, Professor Tagaski said, “One soul [is very] small; but three souls [can make a] big sound.”

---

### **October 21, 2007**

Last Thursday night, I attended another taiko practice at the university. This time, however, I participated. I must admit that playing taiko is tremendously difficult. The mechanics of the sticking are completely different than that of playing Western-style drums: rather than using your wrists and fingers, the taiko stick requires the use of your entire arm. Thus, physically, it is a much more taxing exercise.

Furthermore, so much of what makes taiko drumming so special is the synchronization of your motions with the motions of the other players: that is to say, there is an tremendous

amount of coordination among all the players. When you watch the videos, it is evident that all of the drummers are in perfect unison.

I must admit that after twenty-five minutes of playing I had blisters on my fingers! As difficult as it was, it was a truly awesome experience.

Also, on Thursday afternoon, I went to the Kyoto National Museum to see a special exhibition of the Kano school, traditional Japanese art from the mid-16<sup>th</sup> Century. Not surprisingly, my favorite painting was entitled, “Emperor Xuanzong Hits a Drum and Makes Flowers Bloom.” Unfortunately, photography was prohibited; you can probably imagine what this painting looked like (the title says it all). In the permanent collection of the museum, there was several display cases of drums from the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries: some of the drums had pretty cool paintings on them, including ones with designs of maple leaves, dragons and clouds.

---

### **October 21, 2007**

Last night, I went to the Soratane Matsuri at the Yui-myonuji (Buddhist) temple in the neighborhood of Kataoiji here in Kyoto. The festival was an all-day event, although the music mostly was at night. This festival (“matsuri” is Japanese for “festival”) was relatively small; about a hundred people attended.

I arrived shortly after 6pm, and soon thereafter, there was a fire show, with several dances and eight djembe (African hand drum) players. The music was African, and not Japanese: the players brought a “Rasta” feel, as many of them sported dreadlocks. To be honest, I had never heard of Japanese fire shows; and the act itself, in combination with the “foreign” music, was a pretty wild experience. I definitely did not expect to see such a display here in Japan, let alone at a Buddhist temple!

Later in the evening, the taiko students from the university performed about a half-dozen songs. About twenty students played, although, not all at the same time. Their

performance was fantastic: the crowd gave a standing ovation at the end of their set. I have had the privilege to watch their practices this week, and must admit that they sounded their best tonight. The most memorable aspect of the performance was that it was on the footsteps of a Buddhist temple, and in the background, there was a shining golden statue of the Buddha, as if he were enjoying the music, too.

---

### **October 22, 2007**

This afternoon, I visited Professor Takagi at University of Kyoto of Art & Design. I cannot explain how helpful she and everyone else at the Japanese Drums Education Center (the Taiko Department) have been. Professor Takagi has arranged an interview for me with the executive administrator of Asano Taiko, the most renowned taiko crafting company in the world. Asano Taiko was founded in 1609 (!!!) and pretty much is the Rolls Royce of taiko: check out <http://www.asano.jp/en/about/index.html> and look at the “Products” section of the webpage. Asano Taiko is in Ishikawa Prefecture, which is several hours north and east of Kyoto; it is on the coast of the Japan Sea. Actually, it is one of main ports to Sado Island. The interview will be on November 8<sup>th</sup>.

As if that weren't enough, Professor Takagi and the other members of the Taiko Department gave me two really awesome shirts with their group name (Shien), and a really nice towel that has prints of different Japanese drums. It was such a thoughtful gesture: it has been so wonderful to get to know Professor Takagi, the other members of Shien, and the students of Professor Takagi's taiko class.

I just realized that I haven't really written about Shien; so here is a little background information. Professor Takagi founded Shien in 2000; there are eleven members in all, although I have only met five. The group performs nationally and internationally. According to a pamphlet about Shien, the members, “all excel in concentration and spiritual strength, but they still keep challenging themselves through everyday training for a performance that unifies the energy of the drums and the drummer's spirit.” (This

fits so perfectly into the parameters of my research, you probably think I'm making this up!)

After my really great meeting at the Taiko Department, I went to watch a performance by Shien. The show was at a beautiful wooden building that is normally used for tea ceremonies. The building is located on the top of the campus, and very well might be the highest point of all of Kyoto. Hence, there is a splendid view of the entire city and the surrounding mountains.

Shien performed three songs: "Hado," "Nagare," and "Yatai-Bayashi." The first two compositions were originals, and the last was a traditional festival song from the Chinchibu District in the Saitama Prefecture (outside of Tokyo). There were five members of Shien performing today, Professor Takagi, Noda, Yoshida, Kohara and Suzuki (although the last two only played in the second number). Throughout the performance, there were three types of drums used: nagado-daiko, shimedaiko and okedaiko.

Start to finish, the show was exceptional: because I have attended many performances and practices by Professor Takagi's students, it was an interesting change to see a "professional" concert. (That said, the university group is extremely talented!)

To top off a great day, in the evening, Nobu (the student that I am staying with), a bunch of his friends, and I jammed on the roof of one of the buildings at the university for a few hours. In addition to me on drums, there was guitar, bass, trombone, and a bunch of different hand-percussion instruments. It was a good time indeed; playing outdoors to the lights of the city was an awesome experience.

---

**November 3, 2007**

Yesterday, I went to the Uryuyamasai festival, a three-day celebration of art, music and dance at the University of Kyoto of Art & Design. The festival covers the entire campus with countless activities and even more food booths. Everything is run by students, from the battle of the bands to catering to the art contest. It really is a wonderful exhibition of the many talents of the university students.

After exploring around for a bit, I participated in djembe workshop. The djembe is a West African hand drum made from wood and animal hide. Once again, it was really fascinating to see a drum “out of context,” although, I must proclaim that now I firmly believe that it is impossible for any instrument to be “out of context.” That being said, it was really cool to learn how to play the djembe, an African instrument, from a Japanese instructor. The teacher, Kenji, spoke no English; but, fortunately, the student that sat next to me did, and loosely translated what Kenji was conveying to the class of seven. For about an hour and a half, we learned how to evoke the three main sounds of a djembe, and a handful of rhythms. My favorite part was at the end, when the class was divided in two, to play two different beats at once, while one of us soloed.

After the djembe class, I went to watch the taiko students perform. As you all know, I have been to many practices and performances of this group over the past month, so I was familiar with each number they played. Without a doubt, this was the best performance by them I have seen, for a several reasons. First, I was sitting right in the front row: being that close to a taiko performance is an almost indescribable experience. The sound is so intense that you can actually feel the airwaves vibrating: you literally *feel* the music going through your body. Second, between the practice auditorium and the other various places I have seen them perform, I think this space was the most conducive for taiko music. (The performance at the Buddhist temple was very special, but as it was outdoors, from an audiophile’s perspective, it was not ideal). Lastly, they played seven songs, which was by far the longest set I have heard. The last two numbers included all of the students; and those were my favorites, as it was really fun to see everyone playing. (Perhaps because I was the second-chair drummer in middle school, I’ve always liked the idea of everyone playing at once, so no one is excluded!)

Just when I thought my day was over, I stumbled upon an all-female African dance and drum troupe - all of the performers were Japanese. They sounded absolutely incredible. Unfortunately, I ran out of memory on my camera (I had used a full 1.5 gigabits that day!), so I only have a few short videos and pictures. All in all, it was a nice cap to a great day.

---

### **November 7, 2007**

On Saturday, November 3<sup>rd</sup>, I went to the final day of the Uryuyamasai festival at the university. Without a doubt, the highlight was a trio of two djembe players and a didgeridoo player. They only played for about forty-five minutes, but it was a really enjoyable show. For the second half of the show, one of the musicians played a cajon box – which basically is a hollowed out wooden box. The cajon box has a surprisingly strong sound to it.

Tomorrow morning, I am, sadly, leaving Kyoto. I will be back for a few days in December, and I already look forward to my return here. Kyoto is a very special city and I feel very fortunate to have had the opportunity to spend almost a month here. Although I am sad to leave, my next month in Japan will be extremely exciting. Tomorrow, I am going to the Ishikawa Prefecture to visit the Asano Taiko factory. Professor Takagi is (very graciously) accompanying me; and, we will have lunch with the head executive of Asano. It is going to be a remarkably unique opportunity: remember that Asano is the premier taiko company in Japan.

My plan is to spend the night in Ishikawa and then take a train to Naoetsu, a port town where I will catch a ferry to Ogi, on Sado Island. I will stay in Ogi for four to six days; Kodo Village, home of the Kodo Drummers, is about 10 kilometers from Ogi. I will be on Sado Island for about a week; and I anticipate that I will not have internet connection. I will update my website as soon as possible, but it might not be for ten days or so.

Lastly, today I purchased tickets for the Kodo “One Earth Tour:” I will attend shows in Hiroshima, Okayama and Osaka, all in mid-December. I am really excited to attend those shows! Oddly enough, in Japan, for any concert/sporting event/movie, you can buy tickets at any convenience store, such as Seven-Eleven or AM-PM...

---

### **November 8, 2007**

Moshimoshi. Today, I had the unique privilege of touring the Asano Taiko factory in Hakusan, in the Ishikawa Prefecture. This morning began at 8:30 when Professor Takagi, her husband (Noda Satoru), and their three-year-old son picked me up in Kyoto and took the three-hour trip to Hakusan. It goes without saying that Professor Takagi and her husband went well out of the way to assist my research; although, she did need to bring a drum of her own to the factory for repair. I cannot reiterate how grateful I am for all of their help: they (and everyone at the University of Kyoto, for that matter) have created so many special research opportunities and otherwise wonderful life-experiences throughout my time in Japan.

Before I go in the details of my experiences at Asano Taiko, I would like to give you all some more background information on the company. As I have written in former posts, Asano Taiko is the *crème de la crème* of Japanese percussion. The company was founded in 1609 by a drum crafter named Saemongoro, who had been commissioned to produce drums for the local prince - think about how long that was; that predates the Declaration of Independence by 167 years!

For the past 398 years, Asano Taiko has been passed down generation to generation, father to eldest son. In fact, many of the administrators, directors, and coordinators are directly related to Saemongoro, making Asano Taiko truly a family business. Although it is a family business, it is not some small “mom-and-pop” company: the Asano Taiko complex is three main buildings: a museum (with office rooms), the shop (with practice rooms), and, of course, the factory itself. There are also five warehouses for storage, a few blocks from the main complex.

In their brochure (which is more like a magazine, as it is almost thirty pages), the company emphasizes the sacred essences of using only natural materials in the drums: if a taiko is made from synthetic materials, something is lost. Thus, the spirit of nature is in the sound of each drum: “Gripping the earth with their powerful roots, trees receive all the bounty and energy of nature as they grow, and then pour their spirit into that beautiful and powerful sound. That sound then becomes eternal, capable of reaching the deepest parts of all us.”

The brochure also has several pages on how they “bring the materials to life,” including the process of the selection of the woods used for the shell and prepping the leather for the heads. The brochure reads, “Throughout the generations, the sound of the taiko has been the thread that connects the hearts and skill of Asano Craftsmen with that of the performers to the present day. By loving the spirit of trees, and by communicating with the wood, Asano Taiko has continued to spin that thread.”

We arrived in Hakusan just before noon. We were greeted by the head executive of Asano Taiko, Yasuo Asano. Unfortunately, Yasuo did not speak English; however, fortunately, Professor Takagi was able to translate for me. First, we ate lunch – a traditional sashimi bento box with miso soup and fresh fruit. After talking with Yasuo (I would write, “Mr. Asano,” but that would just get too confusing,) I met Sumiyo Asano, the rental coordinator of Asano Taiko. She is a cousin of Yasuo, and is in her mid-twenties: she studied at the University of Michigan, and was fluent in English, which was a tremendous help.

After lunch, Sumiyo took me to the Taiko Crossroad Museum, which had an array of Japanese percussion instruments, and an international collection as well, mostly from Indonesia, India and various African countries. One display had Japanese drums used in Buddhist and Shinto rituals; my favorite of which was the gaku-daiko. Of course, there were two massive taiko drums, called odaiko: I was able to play both of them! Also of

interest, there was an impressive collection of drums and crafting tools from over one-hundred years ago.

After the museum, Sumiyo took me to the factory. The factory had absolutely everything in it, from power sanders to the lacquer stations to the painters...well everything you would need to make a drum if you only had a tree trunk! One of the drums that they were working on was almost seven feet in diameter and, top to bottom, was probably about ten feet tall!

Everything was really interesting to learn about, but I really enjoyed learning about how the heads (also called “skins”) are made. After the leather is cured, it is stretched for twelve hours on each side, and then applied onto the shell. To soften the leather of heads, two things are done: first, sake is rubbed on the skin. Second, the skins are (carefully) jumped on.

When I asked Sumiyo about how the pitch of each drum is perfected, she told me that it is first done by ear, but also there is a special computer that reads the pitch and determines if it is perfect or not. A pretty cool marriage of tradition and technology, indeed.

Taiko is a complex genre of music because it is used in both religious and non-religious settings. For the most part, taiko is a cultural art; not necessarily performed as a “religious” endeavor. Yet, taiko drums are used in Buddhist and Shinto rituals and ceremonies. I had always assumed that the same drum would be used in a religious or non-religious performance, but I learned that taiko drums used in the temples are almost always painted. The temple will provide a specific pattern and color sequence; only blue, red, yellow, white and black are used. Also, gold leaf is often used to wrap the drum, which makes the drums that much more beautiful.

(I would like to clarify something I should have said a long time ago: in Japanese, “taiko” means drum, so when I use the phrase “taiko drum,” it is redundant; but, I do think it makes writing about the field of taiko a little bit less confusing).

After I toured the factory with Sumiyo Asano, Yasuo Asano (the head executive) showed me the five storage warehouses, which was actually really fascinating. Three of the warehouses had countless taiko shells in every size imaginable. The last two warehouses were, by far, the most interesting: one had an absolutely massive tank to chemically dry the timber used for the drums. Yasuo then showed me the last warehouse: it was a smoke room, to dry the wood naturally. He asserted that smoking the wood is “much better” than using the timber-dryer. According to the brochure, “Asano Taiko naturally dries the rough carved bodies from 3 to 5 years under close supervision in a moisture controlled environment.”

I finally discovered what the spiral taiko symbol means: it is called a “tomoe,” and according to Asano Taiko, it, “it has long been a symbol of the spiral created by the energy of thunder and cloud, fire and water and universal creation in Asia. The spiral represents the meeting, clashing and flow of Heaven and Earth, Yin and Yang. In Japan, the tomoe was considered to be the shape of the human soul and fetus. From that idea, the heavenly spiral of Heaven, Earth and Humanity, mitsudomoe (three comma design), was created.” Pretty neat, huh?

I debated purchasing a drum from Asano Taiko, but it actually turns out that every order is completely custom, and also, there is a one to two month minimum wait. As these are the finest taiko drums in Japan, they are very, very expensive; but, the precision in the craftsmanship is worth every penny. Undoubtedly, Asano Taiko has mastered the art of the drum.

---

**November 10, 2007**

After taking a train from Hakusan to Naoetsu, I boarded a ferry to Sado Island. In the late afternoon I arrived in Ogi, a tiny port town on Sado Island. I made my way to a youth hostel, which is basically a traditional Japanese house. Since it is the off-season, there are no other guests.

On Saturday morning, I walked to Kodo Village, which is 4.5 kilometers (just under three miles) from the hostel. Aside from the rain and the fact that it was an uphill walk, it was a pretty nice journey. For part of it, I was walking beside a bamboo forest, which was very beautiful.

Just above Kodo Village is the Sado Island Taiko Centre. Built in 2006, the SITC has a magnificent view of the bay. The SITC is directly affiliated with the Kodo group; the Taiko Centre houses the Kodo Cultural Foundation, which was established in 1997.

Undoubtedly, Kodo represents the best of taiko: only the top Japanese drummers are admitted into the group. The Kodo community consists of fifty-two people: twenty-seven drummers and twenty-five staff members.

Kodo has a tremendously grueling schedule: one third of the year is spent touring internationally, another third touring in Japan and another third on Sado Island. Since 1981, Kodo has had over 2,900 performances in forty-three different countries!

I was fortunate enough to meet Atsushi Sugano, the Administrative Director of the Kodo Cultural Foundation. Mr. Sugano gave me a tour of the building, and told me much about Kodo itself. The Taiko Centre has a giant practice space that is used for workshops; throughout the year, various one-day classes on taiko playing are taught to all different age groups. In the practice room, there are, of course, many different drums; there was one particularly intriguing drum that had several tree branches coming out of it – a very natural look!

The Taiko Centre sold a variety of Kodo memorabilia and records, including the score, composed by Kodo, for the Jet Li movie, *Hero*. I bought the most recent Kodo yearbook (which had some English in it), and two records, *Heartbeat: Best of Kodo 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary* and *Kodo Mondo*, a collaborative effort with Mickey Hart, the drummer of the Grateful Dead, and Zakir Hussain, who is considered to be the top living Indian tabla player.

To a certain degree, Kodo represents the forefront of “spirituality” in music: by connecting with other foreign artists – like the Grateful Dead’s Mickey Hart and Indian tabla maestro Zakir Hussain – Kodo embraces the inter-connectedness of all music. This fusion is a delicate process, as it not only must respect the unique identities of all participants, but also create something truly innovative.

After I left the Taiko Centre, I went to Kodo Village, which opened in 1988. The Kodo group (which is simply referred to as “Kodo”) made their debut at the Berlin Festival in 1981. Taiko had been popular on Sado Island prior to the foundation of Kodo; but, through Kodo, over the past twenty-six years, there has been a tremendous evolution of taiko music on Sado.

A man named Gen Matsui gave me a tour of Kodo Village, which is three main buildings: an office building with a kitchen and dining hall, a dormitory for first-, second- and third-year members, and, of course, a practice hall. There is a definite sense of communal values in Kodo Village: all members, performers or staffers, are obliged to cook. Furthermore, in the springtime, everyone is involved in collecting firewood for the following winter season. Also, everyone partakes in working on the local farm. The concept that no individual is greater than the collective whole creates for a very positive environment.

In the liner of the *Heartbeat: Best of Kodo 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary* record, it reads: “Exploring the limitless possibilities of the traditional Japanese drum, the taiko, Kodo are forging new directions for a vibrant living art-form. The taiko is something you experience

viscerally as the sound of the drum travels from the player and reverberates in the body of the listener... Kodo strives to both preserve and reinterpret traditional Japanese performing arts as they develop new styles that transcend all genre and borders.” Thus, Kodo uses a traditional Japanese instrument in a contemporary context.

In the introduction of the Kodo yearbook, it explains: “The name ‘Kodo’ has two meanings. The literal readings of the two characters that make up the name ‘children of the drum.’ A reflection of Kodo’s desire to play their drums simply, with the heart of a child. The word ‘Kodo’ is also a homonym for ‘heartbeat’ – humanity’s most fundamental source of rhythm – the first sound a child hears in their mother’s womb.”

Although there is no direct connection between Kodo and any specific religious institution, there is an undeniable essence of “spirituality” in their music. While I will be the first to admit that using such a broad term as “spirituality” can be dangerous and misleading, there is something so pure and universal about Kodo’s music that the term seems appropriate. In the book, it affirms, “Kodo uses the taiko’s unique ability to transcend language and cultural barriers and reminds listeners in all places of their membership in a larger community: the world.”

The “spiritual” element of Kodo is evident in the group’s appreciation and dedication to nature. The Kodo Village is nestled in the wilderness of Sado Island – the founder of Kodo, Ei Rokusuke, specifically chose a remote, but beautiful, location.

Surely, music is a product of its environment: the gritty lyrics of hip-hop genuinely reflect the struggles of urban life. Thus, Kodo uses nature as inspiration: it would be next to impossible to make their music in Tokyo. On one Kodo record, “Blessing of the Earth,” the cover shows a taiko drum growing out of the soil.

Today was a truly special day: it is so difficult to explain all of my experiences, but I really feel so fortunate to have had the opportunity to see Kodo Village and meet various Kodo members. Everyone was extremely helpful – I know I say that quite often these days, but when you consider the fame and stature of Kodo, it is remarkable that I was

able just to have the chance to see their headquarters. I am so excited to see the performances in December!

---

### **November 11, 2007**

In the previous post, I (intentionally) failed to mention that Atsushi from the Sado Island Taiko Centre had told me that on Sunday, there would be a festival at the Kodo Kenshujo (the Kodo Apprentice Centre) in the town of Kakinoura. Because Kakinoura is about an hour away from Ogi and there are no public buses in between the two towns, Atsushi, very thoughtfully, arranged a ride for me.

On Sunday morning just after eleven, I was picked up by two Kodo members, Shogo and Tokyo. In the pouring rain, we drove north up the coast to Kakinoura. It was a narrow, windy road, sandwiched in between the edge of a rocky forest and an even rockier ocean. The scenery and conversation made for an excellent combination...

Shogo spoke English very well; so I was able to learn about him and his experiences with Kodo. Mind you that, although they are in their early 20s, Shogo and Tokyo are a full-time members of Kodo. So there I was, sitting in the backseat of a van with two professional Kodo members: these guys have toured extensively throughout the United States, Europe and Japan. Every August, Kodo holds an annual festival, called the Earth Celebration, on Sado, and there are performances from drummers from all over the world. (Yes, I know that I should have been there; next time I come to Japan, it will be to attend the EC). This year, Shogo and other members of Kodo performed with one of the other headliners, Zakir Hussain. As I wrote in the previous post, Zakir Hussain has recorded with Kodo in the past (on *Mondo Head*); and he is a phenomenal tabla player. Zakir has also played with John McLaughlin (of the Miles Davis fame) and Bill Laswell (producer of various David Byrne and Herbie Hancock records). Zakir's father was the tabla player for Ravi Shankar. So, in short, Shogo has jammed with the most distinguished tabla player alive. The more I think about it, the more remarkable it was that I was able just to ride and hang out with Shogo and Tokyo.

Tokyo has been playing taiko for over fifteen years; unfortunately, he didn't really speak English, so I was not able to learn too much about his experiences with the group. Shogo has played for about twelve years. Both spent two years as apprentices at the Kodo Kenshujo, and have been formally playing with the group for just over a year. I asked Shogo if when he was younger whether he aspired to someday play with Kodo, and he said that he had. Essentially, he is living his dream, which is so admirable and, as a fellow drummer, so cool on many levels. It would be like learning to play drums listening to Led Zeppelin records and then the band asking you to join. Anyways, that is just such a wild concept to comprehend.

Just a week or so ago, Kodo ended their annual "One Earth Tour," which, as the name indicates, is an international tour, lasting about four months. I knew that Kodo had performed in New York City, and I asked him how the shows went. Kodo played two shows at Joe's Pub, a small venue in downtown Manhattan. Normally, Kodo performs at good-sized concert halls, like Carnegie Hall, but they decided to play in a more intimate space. Shogo said the shows were fantastic (both were sold-out, of course), but the loudness of the drums was amplified by the small space so much so that the wine glasses from the bar shattered!

After talking about New York City for a while, I commented to Shogo on the beauty of Sado Island, and how the Kodo Village is in an ideal setting for making music. I told him that I believe music often reflects its environment. He responded, "It is important to practice in nature. We must never forget nature." It certainly seems that Kodo is greatly influenced by nature: between the group only using drums made of natural materials to the location of their headquarters, Kodo uses nature as a spiritual inspiration.

After picking up an elderly couple in Kakinoura, we made our way to the Kodo Kenshujo (the Apprentice Center), which was founded just over ten years ago. The Kenshujo is actually an old school house that was going to be torn down, but Kodo bought the building at the last minute. Every year, after many young taiko players audition, ten new

members are inducted to the Kodo Kenshujo. The apprenticeship is a very serious commitment: the members all live together, which includes cooking and farming.

Shogo explained that the training process is intensely physically difficult: every morning the group runs ten kilometers (6.2 miles). Being a member of the Kodo Kenshujo is basically like having a two-year long audition to join Kodo. Even though ten new apprentices join the program every year, only one or two older apprentices join Kodo. Shogo said that this past year, no apprentices were inducted to the group; so, even with all that work, nothing is guaranteed.

After we arrived at the Kodo Kenshujo, I learned that today was a very special day, the Sukakusai – the harvest festival. (Sukaku means harvest, and sai means festival). It seemed like the entire town of Kakinoura packed in this old gymnasium – there were probably about three hundred people in total, all sitting on the floor at tables.

It seemed like there was an endless amount of food, beer, sake, and most importantly, conversation. Fortunately, I met a Japanese-Canadian man named John: he was an apprentice four years ago, but since moved on. John explained many things about the festival, and was gracious enough to help translate when I was conversing with the locals.

The Kodo apprentices performed for almost two hours, playing a mix of Kodo compositions and traditional pieces. They sounded really great: it was just so enjoyable to be eating and drinking with everyone, while listening to the music.

One of the most memorable aspects of the festival was when the locals were performing: on Sado, there is a folk dance, with specific drum beats, that are done to ward away evil spirits, called Oni-daiko. Just about everyone knows how to do the dance and play the beat; but the performance is only two people, the drummer and the dancer. The way it is decided who drums and dances is the best part: someone in the audience will tell the MC, “I will give X dollars (yen actually) if so-and-so dances.” So members of the community call on their friends to do the dance – and usually very intoxicated individuals are called

upon. The money raised helps fund the festival. As you can imagine, this can turn into a very funny scene, particularly when the would-be dancer either has no interest in getting on stage, or very little capability in doing so.

In all honesty, as this was a harvest festival, there was a fair amount of drinking, so if my camera work is a bit shaky, that is why! It was actually really amusing seeing almost the entire community (of mostly very old people, I should add) getting tanked. I probably shouldn't be writing about this; so let's just leave it at that, to the best of my memory, the festival was a blast.

---

### **December 13, 2007**

For the past few days, I have been in Hiroshima, which was a very introspective experience. I strongly encourage anyone who makes it to Japan to visit the city, not only to pay due respect to the city's tragic history, but also because it is just a really nice place.

My primary reason to visit Hiroshima was because Kodo was performing at Hiroshima Yubin Chokin Hall last night. Since I arrived in Japan in early October, I have been looking forward to this opportunity, to see the premier taiko group perform live. When I was much younger, I saw two Kodo performances (in Manhattan and at SUNY Purchase); but, as I was less than ten-years-old, I remember very little from those shows, and did not really appreciate the musicianship.

After the sold out crowd filed in the concert hall, the show promptly began at 6:30pm. Kodo performed two sets, for a total of twelve songs lasting over two-hours. Although Kodo is a percussion group, there were a handful of numbers that had vocals in addition to the drumming.

Kodo has twenty members: with the exception of the finale, at no point were all of the members on stage at the same time. Song to song, the number of performers on stage varied: sometimes there were only two, but more often between six to ten members.

Because Kodo frequently performs traditional festival pieces (that they have made original arrangements for), dancing also is an intricate element to their concerts. Furthermore, due to the physical nature of the music, when the members are performing, they often are dancing while playing. All of this creates an amazing visual spectacle.

The night began with a duet, “O-daiko Hounou,” a traditional piece with one vocalist and one performer playing a giant o-daiko, one of the largest taiko drums. After several minutes, the two performers jointly played a standing nagado-taiko, one on each side. The rhythm was fairly basic, but it was so perfectly delicate that it appeared like the two men were painting the drum with the beat.

The second number, “Jingi-no-Taiko,” is a Kodo original: the song begins with three female members, wearing elaborately beautiful dresses, playing the katsugi-okedo-taiko, a medium-sized drum that is almost like a marching drum. Five male members, playing a small bell with a hammer, surround the women, while they all sing.

During the next number, “Yae-no Furyu,” five nagado-taiko drums (the standard taiko) were set up in a V position, with two members playing each drum. At the climax of the song, which is a traditional piece arranged by the group, it truly sounded as if all ten performers had transmogrified into one giant being playing one giant drum. I realize how ridiculous that sounds, but the sound was so tremendous and the ten drummers were so perfectly synchronized, that if your eyes were closed, you would have never guessed it was more than one person playing. It was absolutely incredible to see such perfect unity among so many players: it was almost as if the drummers were shadows of one another. Of course the sensations of sound are the core of a Kodo performance, but, in a way, the visual aspect can be the most exciting part. The coordination among the ten players simply was amazing.

Another really interesting aspect about “Yae-o Furyu” is that at the beginning of the song, as it starts to really pick up, the members are shouting back and forth: there is

something to be said about the intensity of hearing the drummers shout while playing such a furious beat. I wish I knew what they were saying – if it is just to display raw emotions or if it serves to keep everyone in time (I would guess the former, though). Hands down, this song was the highlight of the concert.

The fifth song, “Miyake,” another traditional piece arranged by Kodo, was quite outstanding. As the lights begin to brighten the stage, the audience only sees one drummer standing above five different drums. The performer begins an electric solo that lasts several minutes. Splashing in an array of sixteenth-note triplets while demonstrating his ability to constantly change the tempos, he seamlessly moves across the nagado-taiko, tsukeshime-taiko, okedo-taiko-eitetsu, gakkō and kokoro drums. Slowly, a woman wearing a stunning red dress begins a delicate dance, while positioned next to a small nagado-taiko that is on a riser. Her movements were reminiscent of the oni-daiko performances at the harvest festival on Sado Island I saw: she played the drum in the same gentle manner. It was a fascinating juxtaposition of this lady in red playing a drum softly and slowly, while another man was producing an extravagant rhythm.

The next song, “Hana-Hachijo,” was the most light-hearted of the night. Three male performers slowly came out with their backs to the audience, with small katsui-okedo-taiko drums strapped to their chests. Their movements were so comically animated that the whole audience was in stitches. It is very difficult to describe their little step-and-dance, but it just looked (intentionally) very silly and cartoonish.

When it seemed as if there was not going to be any real music attached to this bit of the show, the three performers then demonstrated a countless number of extremely complicated tricks with their drumsticks, all in unison. This was actually my single favorite moment of the whole night.

The following number, “Ranka,” a Kodo original that was composed this year, was one of the more visually elaborate songs. There were three drummers playing five different drums, including the hirado-taiko, which, I learned on Sado Island, is often referred to as

the “Big Mac” drum, because of its hamburger-like shape. In front of the drummers was a woman, sitting on a man’s shoulders, wearing a dragon costume – with a red mask and everything. At one point during the song, the “dragon” even played a beat on a small drum. Watching this song was like attending a mini-festival.

The final song of the first act, “Un,” was composed this past year by my friend, Shogo, who drove me to the festival on Sado Island. As part of the initiation process, the younger members of Kodo are obligated to write original music for the group to perform. Like the previous song, it was a very visual experience: there were four dancers wearing golden costumes and lion masks that had huge wigs. It was very interesting that this was one of the newest Kodo songs, yet it seemed to be the most “traditional,” in the sense that it looked like it was a classic festival song and dance. Regardless, it was a great conclusion to the first half of the concert. Shogo did a fantastic job writing this song!

The second act was exceptional; but, due to the length of this post, I will not go through each song, but instead just my two favorites. “Monochrome” demonstrated the seemingly limitless stamina of the Kodo players. Sitting down, seven drummers played the tsukeshime-taiko, the highest pitched Japanese drum, similar in size to a snare drum. In the beginning, only one drummer would play at a time; but, the instant he would stop, someone else would begin, so the sound was continuous. At times, it sounded like the drummers were echoing one another. Eventually, everyone was playing together. The collective precision was phenomenal: the drummers were able to make it seem as if you are listening to the show in perfect surround sound. As the song had such a fast tempo and was so long, the fitness of the players was unparalleled to anything I’ve ever seen before.

Without a doubt, the highlight of the second act was, “O-daiko,” perhaps the most famous Kodo song. For this number, two members play each side of an o-daiko drum that is absolutely enormous, probably about five feet wide, maybe even bigger. (Think that a snare drum is normally about fourteen inches in diameter; so this drum is just huge). Each player is only wearing a mawashi (which is identical to the thong sumo wrestlers wear);

the audience could see one of the players, as the drum completely blocks the other player at the back of the drum. Because the o-daiko drum is so large, the sound is so great that the listener is able to literally *feel* the music. There is such a powerful force created by drum that the sound waves are, in a sense, tangible.

I have seen some amazing performances while in Japan, but last night really made me understand that the sheer ability of Kodo transcends tenfold anything that I have previously witnessed. The members of Kodo are on another level of talent: it is no wonder that they are the top taiko group in the world, and that the word “taiko” is directly associated with Kodo.

---

**December 15, 2007**

Tonight, in Okayama, a mid-sized city west of Hiroshima, I saw my second Kodo performance in the past three days. Before the show, I ran into Gen Matsui, one of the managers of Kodo. He actually approached me; I was surprised he had remembered me – he had shown me around Kodo Village on Sado about a month back. I told him that I had gone to the previous performance in Hiroshima, and he really liked the idea that I was following Kodo’s tour this week. It was great to see a familiar face.

Although I had much better seats tonight, I will admit that I did not like this venue as much as the one in Hiroshima. While it was nice to have a more intimate setting, the venue was almost too small, as the sound of the drums was so loud that, at certain points of the concert, the rear walls were rattling!

This did not affect the quality of the show, though; and I am sure I am just being a little nit-picky. And actually, now that I think about the idea that the drums, that are acoustic and thus have no electronic amplification, could be so loud that they shake a concert hall, that’s pretty cool!

While there were certain numbers that I enjoyed more so tonight, particularly “Hana-Hachijo,” the song with the three players performing many stick-tricks, I think that the show in Hiroshima was a bit more fluid. Again, I’m just being fussy, as it was a really awesome show.

The program for the “Trans-Border 2007 December Concert Series,” written by Kodo Artistic Director Jun Akimoto, asserts that Kodo, “at times stays true to our roots, and at times makes a break with the past in order to realize new expressions.” Most importantly, the group affirms that, “‘Tradition’ is not a constant. Rather, it is a formidable force that evolves to survive the passage of time.”

Jun Akimoto also writes that Kodo strives to “explore new creative territory through song and dance, two expressions that are inextricably linked to the drum and help realize its full potential.” Because Kodo refuses to be tethered to tradition, there are limitless creative musical possibilities for the group.

---

### **December 16, 2007**

Last night, I attended my final Kodo concert in Osaka, which is barely a twenty-minute ride on the Shinkansen (bullet train) from Kyoto. Despite that I have spent all this time in Kyoto, I have never made it Osaka before yesterday. It is definitely a much more industrial city, and has much less cultural significance than Kyoto; but, I did like it much more than I had anticipated.

I saw Gen Matsui again; we chatted for about ten minutes before and after the show. I cannot emphasize how warm and friendly he has been to me: he even offered to give me a tour shirt (I had bought one the night before), so instead gave me the 2007 Kodo yearbook. Again, it’s so amazing to me how welcoming and helpful he has been. It’s just very reassuring to know that even though Kodo is one of the most famous and successful Japanese arts groups, the members and staff still are extremely grounded.

Of the three Kodo performances I saw this week, I thought this was the best for a handful of reasons. First, it was definitely my favorite venue: the acoustics were noticeably better here than Hiroshima or Okayama. Second, I had better seats: I've always felt that vantage point doesn't make or break a concert-going experience, but it is that much more exciting to be closer (although, with a taiko performance, you do not want to be too close, otherwise the sound quality will suffer, as it will be too undefined). Lastly, because I was so familiar with the set, I was able to appreciate each song individually and the whole flow of concert, in general.

I am so happy I have been able to see these three performances. It has been such an appropriate, wonderful conclusion to my time here in Japan.

---

### **December 17, 2007**

Yesterday was my last full day in Kyoto: aside from tying up some loose ends and running some minor errands, I basically just rode my bike around the city one last time. As I was cruising along the river, I saw a guy playing a djembe, so I stopped to watch for a little bit. I thought it was a very appropriate encounter. After that, I was hungry, and wound up at a tiny ramen noodle shop near the Gion entertainment district.

To give you an idea of the setting, the restaurant didn't even have doors – it was a real hole-in-the-wall, literally and figuratively. The place was a real “locals-only” joint: the food was delicious, exceptionally cheap, but the experience stuck with me for a very, very odd reason.

The whole time I was eating lunch, Southern (American) gangster rap was playing from the restaurant's sound system. Now, I have come to learn that among the Japanese youth, there is a certain idolization of the American hip-hop culture. Japanese rap is very popular (and of course, as is American rap); so, I have heard my fair share of rap while in Japan. Nonetheless, what was so striking about this incident, was I was the youngest person at the noodle shop...by about thirty years. So there I was, eating delicious ramen

while listening to T.I. (a popular Southern rapper) with a bunch of elderly Japanese people.

While this experience does not have any direct correlation to my research, from day one, I have slowly understood the idea that music is the universal language. This prospect is nothing new to me; almost everyone agrees to the universality of music. Yet, seeing it (rather hearing it, that is) in practice is something truly remarkable. Music disregards the notion of context; but, I guess that is what makes it universal, right?

---

**December 17, 2007**

Taiko music is present throughout Japanese pop culture in so many random ways that it is just astonishing. It must be remembered that the taiko drum is a very traditional instrument. At the moment, there is a very popular arcade video game in Japan: a taiko simulator, where there are two big rubber and plastic taiko drums with sticks. It is similar to the popular video game, “Guitar Hero,” where you “play” a song with a controller shaped like a guitar. In this game (let’s just call it “Taiko Hero” from here on out), you follow a beat, and either compete against the computer or another player.

I have played Taiko Hero a bunch of times, and it is a blast. It’s very funny because the songs in Taiko Hero are not like traditional Japanese taiko songs; I have even played it to the Mario Brothers theme song. For me, it’s just really neat to see taiko in such a contemporary and popular context.

---

**FINAL REFLECTIONS ON JAPAN**

It is amazing how quickly the past few months in Japan have unfolded: I am still in disbelief that my time here has come to an end. I still feel it is remarkable how fluidly the past few months have gone: I have seen some incredible performances, met some truly wonderful people and had the opportunity to travel extensively throughout the country.

In all honesty, prior to my arrival, I knew very little about taiko. I am so pleased that I was able to have a logical progression in my study of Japanese drumming and drum crafting. It just worked out so well that I was able to build my way “up:” that is, I first learned about taiko through the students at the university – and thus was able to begin to appreciate the dedication it takes to study taiko. Then, I was able to learn about the instrument itself, while visiting the Asano Taiko factory. Next, I went to Sado Island and got my first real taste of Kodo, and began to understand the spiritual relationship between taiko and nature. Lastly, I attended several Kodo performances: as excellent as Shien (the group from the university) were, simply put, Kodo is the most talented taiko group in the world. I am sure that I would not have appreciated the tremendous level of musicianship of the Kodo performers if I had seen the three shows in October. While I, admittedly, did not plan to have such a logical progression, there was a seamless evolution to my research here in Japan.

Indeed, the initial parameters of this research fellowship sought to focus on the “spiritual essence” of drumming and drum crafting. Of course, the idea of “spirituality” is a very broad and rather ambiguous concept: thus, throughout this year, I have intended to concentrate mostly on the drumming and drum crafting within the religious institution. That being said, during my stay in Japan, I did focus more on the “spiritual essence” of taiko.

Without a doubt, taiko does have a place within Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines; yet, I have learned that in these situations, the drums are more ornamental than essential to the religious service. That is to say, in Fiji and India, for example, the drum often has an explicit function within the prayers and rituals. In Japan, that tends not to be the case.

During my visit to Asano Taiko, the most famous Japanese drum company, it was interesting to see the differences in the crafting of a taiko for religious and non-religious purposes. While Zen Buddhism greatly differs from the various other sects of Buddhism throughout Japan and it is not fair to associate all forms of Japanese Buddhism with Zen, I would have anticipated that because Zen (and to a lesser extent, any form of Buddhism

in general) emphasizes minimalism and simplicity, taiko drums used in the temples would be very plain. On the contrary, the taiko drums employed in various Buddhist rituals and prayers almost always have very intricate designs and are painted in an array of colors. Although I am not sure what all this means, it is very intriguing, and I would have never hypothesized this.

Speaking of the drums themselves, I am really disappointed that I did not buy a drum while in Japan, but the circumstances were not ideal. The truth is that most of the taiko drums are so big and played in such a different technique than Western drums (taiko is played with your whole body, whereas Western drums are supposed to be played only with wrists and fingers), that there would not really be a point of me owning one. I did find an amazing taiko, beautifully painted black and gold...but it was over \$3,000 without shipping! It is still possible that I will order a taiko from Miyamoto or perhaps even Asano, pending the price is right, and more importantly, that I would actually use the drum.

One memorable experience that I have yet to write about was my visit to the John Lennon Museum in Tokyo. What is so awesome about this fellowship is that I have an infinite flexibility in my program: the John Lennon Museum has nothing to do with my research, but it represents another facet of my greater interest in music. It was one of the most interesting museums I have ever visited; a truly comprehensive and enlightening experience. In all honesty, George Harrison has always been my favorite Beatle, followed by Paul McCartney; and, even though I have always loved John, I developed a new, profound respect for him not only as a musician, but also as a human being. He truly was one of the most important people of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. I definitely adhere to his philosophy of diplomacy through music, even if it oversimplifies the solution to world peace.

Many apologies for the frazzled nature of this post; it is very difficult to sum up how wonderful my experiences in Japan were. I cannot wait to go back. I would like to give a BIG thank you to Noriko Fuku, Professor Takagi, Nobu, Kyoko (Nobu's mom), Noda



the world. The festival predominately features Carnatic (South Indian) music, but also, there is an occasional Hindustani (North Indian) performance. The festival is held at many different venues, and there are daily performances from 9am until the evening (about 9:30pm). To make it even better, all of the shows until 4pm are always free!

If that weren't enough, from January 3<sup>rd</sup> until January 9<sup>th</sup>, there is a dance festival that will have a ton of music performances, as well. I am thrilled to have arrived in Chennai during the "music" season.

---

### **December 22, 2007**

While in Japan, I became so accustomed to the constant high-speed internet access; it made posting videos and pictures on my website an effortless task. Unfortunately, in India, internet access is scarce and about as quick as a turtle. Thus, I will be unable to post many videos (as it takes over 30 minutes to upload each one); and, generally speaking, I will be updating my site much more infrequently.

All that being said, here is another update: yesterday, I met a rickshaw driver named V. Anthony Mani. After he took me to a delicious restaurant for a buttered chicken tikka lunch, I told him why I was in India. It turns out that he has been studying keyboards for several years, and has invited me to visit his music school. He also explained to me the details of the Margazhi Festival and the upcoming dance festival at the Music Academy in January. Immediately, he and I established a relationship through our mutual interest in music.

This morning, Anthony picked me up at 9am and drove me to the Mylapore Fine Arts Club to hear some music. The venue was an open-aired auditorium in a residential neighborhood. There were five musicians, one singing, and four instrumentalists, playing a violin, moharsing, pedele (like a drone instrument played with the mouth), and mridangam (a South Indian hand drum, similar to the dholak). The songs were sung in Sanskrit, which meant that they had some religious significance, but Anthony did not

know the exact meaning. Sanskrit, one of the oldest known languages, is a liturgical language: that is, since its foundation, the language has been used for religious purposes.

We stayed at the venue for over an hour. I was a little hesitant to leave, but Anthony promised the next venue would be better.

Next, Anthony took me to the Music Academy, an extremely nice facility. The auditorium is relatively new, and even has a state-of-the-art Bose sound system. For this performance, there were three women and three men, playing the same instruments as the players from the Mylapore Fine Arts Club. These songs were sung in Sanskrit, and Anthony told me they were devotional pieces about Paravati, Lord Shiva's wife.

I opted not to attend the performance in the evening, as I was pretty exhausted by the late afternoon. The good news is that there are so many opportunities to hear music over the next few weeks that I can really do all this at my own pace.

---

### **December 23, 2007**

This morning, I was picked up by one of Anthony's friends, a man named Dhinakar. For several hours, Dhinakar and I rode around on his motorcycle throughout Chennai, which was a pretty wild experience. Cheating death always is exhilarating – and sorry Mom, we did not wear helmets! We ate lunch at his house, which was nice to get a home-cooked meal, albeit an extremely spicy one.

Later that evening, I went to the Music Academy. The place was packed, and my seat actually was in the last row of the balcony! (I still had a relatively good view though). As I have written in an earlier post, there are ongoing performances at the Music Academy and various other venues throughout Chennai, so there is no shortage of music to be heard. I have a schedule of all of the performances at the Music Academy, which has been very helpful.

Tonight, I attended another Carnatic music performance, yet there was a little twist. Like many traditional performances, the instruments included a mridangam (wooden hand drum), ghatam (clay hand drum), kanjira (South Indian tambourine), and violin; yet what drew my attention was that there also were two mandolins. (And, of course, for me, the strong percussion section was really fantastic). I have come to learn that mandolins, like violins, are not uncommon in Carnatic music. What was so interesting was that the musicians were making an “Indian” sound out of the mandolin – if I did not have program, I would have never guessed they were playing mandolins.

I always have enjoyed fusion music; and particularly like the idea of a “Western” instrument used in an “Eastern” devotional piece. Once again, the universality of music transcends all cultural and religious boundaries.

### **December 24, 2007**

The daily “programme list” (as they call it) at the Music Academy is as follows: from 9:15am-11:45am a “Senior” artist performs; from 12noon-1:30pm a “Junior” artist performs; from 1:45pm-3:45pm a “Sub Senior” performs; and there are two “Evening Senior” performances at 4:15pm-6:45pm and 7pm-9:30pm (the last two are not free shows). It should be noted that the “Junior” performers are still very good musicians, but there is, of course, a difference in skill (chiefly due to experience, and not necessarily to raw talent).

This afternoon, I went to a “Junior” performance, which included a flute, violin and mridangam. (You’ll notice in the photograph and videos that there is a fourth instrument, a tanpura, which is a drone. Tanpura players are never credited in the music programs; and I always thought drummers were the least respected musicians!)

For the first time in India, I saw a female percussionist. A girl, probably about eighteen years old, was playing the mridangam; and she was very, very talented. While there have been many Carnatic female vocalists, I have never heard of any female drummers - which

is not to say they don't exist. The girl, named Rajna Swaminathan, is actually from a family of mridangam players.

Her father, Madirimangalam Swaminathan, is a very accomplished player: that evening, he performed at the Music Academy, just like his daughter had earlier that day. I think it was pretty interesting that the organizers scheduled today's program in this manner.

The evening performance was a typical Carnatic show: mridangam, violin, flute and ghatam. I must admit that I had never heard of the ghatam before: it is a drum, entirely made from clay – there is not even an animal-skin head! The drum could easily be mistaken for a cooking pot; but, these drums are made specifically for Carnatic performances. Hopefully I can locate a ghatam crafter, because I am very curious how they determine the pitch of the drum.

---

**December 26, 2007**

I have a confession to make: this afternoon, while watching a performance at the Music Academy, I fell asleep. What I did was not a sign of disrespect; in fact, oddly enough, it was almost expected of me. There are many customs within Indian culture that would be deemed rude back in the West, such as dozing during a musical performance and eating with your hands.

Several years ago, I read the autobiography of the sitar legend Ravi Shankar. In one passage, he recounts a special performance he gave for Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India. In the middle of the show, Raviji noticed that Mr. Nehru was sound asleep: in the autobiography, Raviji affirms that when a patron falls asleep during a performance, the musician has done his job. (Side note: in Indian culture, the suffix “-ji” is an honorific title).

I must admit that I have seen countless “snoozers” at the performances at the Music Academy. I'd even estimate that at any given time at least 15% of the audience is in the

Land of Nod. The combination of the hot weather and the droning sound of the tanpura can make a siesta simply irresistible.

...When I awoke from my catnap, I thoroughly enjoyed the performance, which was billed as “Hyderabad Brothers, D. Raghavachari and D. Seshachari” (I am unsure why they have different last names; maybe they are not blood brothers). The mridangam and ghatam players were outstanding: I actually think they were the best rhythm section I have seen here in India. Unfortunately, the ghatam (clay drum) player always is buried in the back of the stage, so I am never able to watch his hand movements. The closing twenty minutes of the performance was a duet between the mridangam player and ghatam player: it was really exciting to see the two players battle back and forth with the beat.

---

### **December 27, 2007**

Today, I had my first tabla lesson. After lunch, Anthony and his friend, Kalai, picked me up and drove me to a small house near the beach (yes, there is a huge beach in Chennai, and oddly enough, although it is the most public part of the city, it is the cleanest. Go figure). The neighborhood, mostly comprised of fishermen, is a pretty interesting, chiefly because it was completely decimated in the 2004 tsunami, but there still are tons of people residing there.

Kalai introduced me to Chandra and his son, Jacob. Chandra is 52 years old, has been playing tabla for over thirty years, and is a recording artist. Jacob, also a tabla player, is in his mid-twenties, and has played for eight years. Although Chandra was there for the whole two-plus hour lesson, Jacob was the main teacher.

(Minor clarification: the tabla is two hand drums, the left one bigger than the right one. “Tablas” is not a word; so I will always refer to it in the singular “tabla,” even though I am referring to two drums).

From having watched many tabla performances, I always have had a tremendous appreciation for level of musicianship it takes to play the instrument. The tabla is not just a hand drum that you can bang away at: it is a very delicate drum that can only be played in a specific manner. The proper tones will not come out by just hitting the drum.

Indeed, like Western drums, tabla provides the rhythm for the music: nonetheless, for all intensive purposes, I might as well have been trying to play a saxophone. The mechanics required to play a tabla are more akin to that of a piano, than a drum set or even bongos. Actually that is not entirely true, because unlike the piano, with the tabla, you can only use certain fingers, certain combinations of those certain fingers, and even more complexly, certain parts of those certain fingers. Complicated to say the least!

What fascinated me most was how each finger must be in a precise position, in order to get the proper tone out of the tabla. To clarify, if your middle finger on your right hand is touching the head, the drum will not make the right sound. Playing the tabla requires a tremendous amount of coordination between your hands and even more so among your digits: the right and left hand are never in identical positions, and the tabla must only be played with the tips of your fingers. (There is another sound made from the heel of your hand, but fingertips are used most often). I was told to pretend the right tabla was on fire, and thus to always play it staccato, never leaving my finger on the drum for more than a split second.

Jacob and I worked on the positioning of the hands and fingers, and other mechanical techniques. I did learn one basic, sixteen-bar beat, the “Teental.” Here is a little chart of the beat:

Dha Dhin Dhin Dha (called the “Sam”)

Dha Dhin Dhin Dha (called the “Tali”)

Dha Thin Thin Tha (called the “Kali”)

Tha Dhin Dhin Dha (also called the “Tali”...maybe I took that down wrong?)

This might not even be worth reading, but here is my description of that chart:

For “Dha,” you use your right index finger and left index finger at the same time. For “Dhin,” you use your right index finger and left index and middle fingers at the same time. The second “Dhin” is played the same as the “Dha.” For “Thin,” you use your right index finger and you close your entire left hand on the drum. For “Tha,” you only use your right index finger. Remember the middle finger on your right hand must never touch the drum, and the ring finger on your right hand must always touch the drum but ever so gently. Got it???

Before he first touched the tabla, Jacob, an Indian Christian, crossed himself. As I have written about before, the tabla is an intricate part of Hindu rituals and prayers. For Hindus, the tabla is not just a manifestation of Sarasvati, the Goddess of Music and Knowledge, but *is* Sarasvati Herself. (I do not think a Westerner could ever truly understand this concept; I know I don’t). The tabla is used in various Muslim rituals and prayers, but of course, the central tenet of Islam maintains absolute monotheism, and rejects all forms of idolatry, thus eliminating the prospect of God manifesting Himself in any material way, like in a drum for instance. I am not positive, but do not think that a Muslim would “bless” his tabla the way a Hindu would.

I found it extremely intriguing that an Indian Christian would bless himself and the drum. I would assume that this is a result of an Indian Hindu converting to Christianity. (Jacob is not a convert; he was born a Christian. Nevertheless, clearly, at some point in his family’s lineage, there was a conversion). Thus, within the scope of Hinduism, certain mannerisms, like the proper etiquette of how to handle the tabla, have been transferred to that of the Indian Christian musician. That is to say, I have never heard of an American Baptist crossing himself before playing his drums in church – but, of course, when it comes to religion and music, anything is possible.

---

**December 29, 2007**

In the late afternoon, I arrived at the Music Academy only to find a queue that stretched out of the venue and well into the parking lot. As I positioned myself to be the last person

in the line, I immediately realized that there was no way I would be able to get a ticket, as this was the longest line I had seen to date. I began talking with the person behind me, a fellow named Ajay, who was around my age, and he said that there was no way we would be able to get tickets. Sure enough, within a matter of seconds, a staff member of the Music Academy informed everyone that no more tickets were available.

Ajay was raised in Chennai, but now works for Dell in Bangalore. After a brief conversation, Ajay and I walked over to the Sathguru Gnanada Hall, another venue on TTK Road.

Ajay told me about his experiences growing up in Chennai and attending the annual music festival. For the people of Chennai, he asserted, “The festival is like a religion.” I learned that there are there are thirty-four venues throughout the city. According to Ajay, “In December, in a twenty kilometer radius, there are 5,000 performances.” (The math checks out; each venue has about five performances per day).

Without a doubt, the Music Academy Madras, as it is formally known, is the top venue in Chennai. Ajay referred to the Music Academy as the “Mecca” of concert halls in Chennai; he said all artists strive to perform there, as it is the most storied venue, this being its 81<sup>st</sup> year of hosting concerts.

Although we were unable to see a performance at the Music Academy, it was very refreshing to see a performance in a new venue. I must admit that aside from attending one concert at the Mylapore Fine Arts Club, I have limited myself solely to the Music Academy.

The Sathguru Gnanada Hall itself is much older than the Music Academy; it almost felt like a high school auditorium – it opened in 1958, and probably hasn’t changed much since then. (The Music Academy is an older institution, but has been renovated recently). Although the Sathguru Gnanada Hall is much more basic than the Music Academy, I

actually liked it a lot. The stage has a really interesting backdrop, and on each side of the stage are some pretty neat paintings.

We saw a traditional Carnatic performance that included a female vocalist, a violinist, a mridangam player, a tambourine player and two tanpura (drone) players. There were many people sitting on the stage; I would assume most were family or disciples of the musicians.

Towards the end of the concert, there was a percussion duet, between the tambourine and mridangam players – a true showcase of rhythm. At the end of the fifteen-minute duet, the other instrumentalists join back in to play just a few bars of the original composition (that had initially segued into the duet), and the piece ended with two more bars of the duet. Not surprisingly, for me, this was the highlight of the concert. It saddens me to note that during the percussion duet many people left. Even in India, drummers get little respect!

After the show was over, Ajay and I ate a delicious dinner at the venue: almost every concertgoer congregated around the outdoor buffet. It was probably the best meal I've had here in Chennai...and, even though it was "street food," I didn't get sick!

To cap off a really great evening, Ajay and I went to a nearby record store – although, it was less like a "store," and more like a very large room with a lot of CDs and DVDs spread across many tables. Ajay recommended seven different records of popular mridangam and tabla players; I must admit I would have been very lost as to what exactly purchase without him there to help!

When I reflect on the evening, it makes me appreciate how our meeting was entirely serendipitous: it is just remarkable how, sometimes, things can unfold so perfectly.

---

**December 30, 2007**

At the Music Academy, the weekends always are pure pandemonium: Chennai is the largest city in Southeast India, so it comes as no surprise that to obtain concert tickets is more a matter of luck than effort. This afternoon, after standing in line for a bit, it was announced that the venue was entirely sold out. There were tickets, however, still available for the “Mini Hall.” At first, I assumed that the Mini Hall would just be a smaller venue, with less acclaimed musicians. Forty rupees later (a buck), I had my ticket and found my way to the Mini Hall at the Music Academy Madras.

I walked in, and immediately said out loud, “Are you serious?” On the stage of the Mini Hall was a projector, with a live feed of the ongoing performance from the Main Hall. I couldn’t help but laugh; there I was, sitting in an auditorium watching a video of a live performance that was going on just a few feet from where I was. In all fairness, both the video and sound quality were very good. It was actually pretty funny, especially since people came pouring in!

After staying for a while, I ventured over to the Sathguru Gnanada Hall, another venue, about a ten-minute walk from the MAM. Unfortunately, only aisle “seats” were available, which I decided to pass on.

Today was an interesting day to observe the madness of the music festival...

---

### **January 4, 2008**

Although the annual December music festival in Chennai has come to a conclusion, during the first two weeks of January, there is a dance festival at the Music Academy Madras. Last night, I attended a traditional dance performance. While I respect the tremendous level of discipline it takes to perform South India dances, to be completely honest, dance does not genuinely interest me.

Of course, in South India, dance without music is like a Q without a U. The music ensemble included a vocalist, violinist, flutist and a mridangam player. Most of my

attention was focused on the musicians; after attending so many music performances last week, I have been able to differentiate between a “good” musician and an “excellent” one. (Being invited to perform at the Music Academy Madras is a privilege reserved for South India’s finest musicians; thus, every show is guaranteed to be enjoyable). Tonight’s musicians were very good; I really appreciated the fact that they had to cater their performance to the dancer. To clarify, the music must be synchronized with the dance; and, due to the length of the performances, it is quite impressive to see such consistent and precise coordination.

Not surprisingly, on the right-hand side of the stage, there was a large statue of Shiva in his famous dancing pose, which is referred to as Nataraja, Lord of Dance. The statue was garlanded with flowers; there also were several candles surrounding the statue.

It is so strange to conduct research on “religious studies” in India: surely, there is not a shortage of information, but because “religion” is so embedded in the culture, it is difficult to separate “religion” from any part of the daily life. In fact, it is interesting to note that prior to the introduction of English to the Subcontinent, throughout the various Indian languages (Hindi, Tamil, Bengali, Urdu, et cetera...there are twenty-two official languages today), the word “religion” did not exist. So something like placing a dancing deity on the stage to inspire the performer is not necessary an act of “religious” ritual, but instead, it just *is*. There does not need to be an academic explanation of *why* the statue would be there, because it is there because it is there – and that is that. Perhaps my biggest qualm with Western academia is the desire to label and justify *everything*. So, in short, the statue was on the stage, because...well...just because.

### **January 7, 2008**

After several tabla lessons with Chandran, I told him that I was interested in purchasing a tabla set. Before I tell the story of my purchasing of a tabla set, I think it is necessary to give some background information about the tabla, so you all know what exactly to look for when buying a set...

Like all instruments, the terminology of the tabla is extensive: I learned many new words while at the drum shop. A bulk of the nomenclature is specific to South India, though. A tabla set consists of two drums: the right drum is the tabla, and the left is the duggi. The tabla is the higher pitched drum: in fact, there six different kinds of tabla (right) drums, one for each note on the music scale, C, D, E, F, G, and A. I was unable to find out why there is not a tabla tuned to B; and I just figure that a B-tuned tabla probably does exist, but just wasn't at that shop. The tabla, also called khumba, is made from sheesham wood, a very durable and heavy wood. There is a direct correlation between the weight and sound of the drum.

Unlike many Western drums, the tabla does not have a consistent circumference; it is widest in the middle - it almost looks like the drum has love handles. At the fattest part of the drum, there are wooden pegs, called gatta, to create tension between the head and the straps. The head of the tabla, called a pudda, is made from goatskin: the thicker the head, the fuller the sound.

The tabla has sixteen leather straps/braces, called deewal, that are made from cow skin. (Yes, I have asked many Hindu tabla players if playing an instrument made from the hide of a holy cow is sacrilege, and only have received ambivalent answers). The deewals are tuned with a hammer.

The much larger, gumdrop-shaped left drum, called the duggi, is very different than the tabla. The chief similarity between the tabla and the duggi is that both have a pudda (goatskin heads). The duggi is not made from wood, but instead from metal, either copper, brass or stainless steel. The copper and brass duggi drums often are plated with nickel. The copper and brass duggi drums are the most common, although they are the two more expensive options for the obvious value of the metal. I was amazed with how differently the sound quality was from copper duggi to stainless steel duggi: the projection and range of the stainless steel duggi is painfully inferior to that of the copper or brass duggi.

There is something to be said of the craftsmanship among a selection of copper, brass and stainless steel duggi drums. The stainless steel ones are manufactured to be mass-produced, so they are mostly machine-made. Any musician will declare that a machine-made instrument has no character. To give the stainless steel duggi drums a further element of “soullessness,” it does not have deewal (leather straps), but uses metal lugs and bolts. It is quite the eyesore, although in all fairness, I am sure it is easier to tune...

Both the tabla and the duggi never touch the ground directly, and always are placed on a ring-shaped pillow, called a langot. The use of the langot is twofold: primarily, the drums simply sound better when they are not touching the ground. Although each drum only has one head, the bottoms of the tabla are closed – unlike the djembe, which also has one head, but is open-ended to project the sound of the drum. Without a doubt, the acoustics of the tabla are much clearer when the drum is rested on the langot.

Secondly, as I have written about before, as the tabla is employed in various religious rituals and prayers, the langot serves as a sign of respect for the instrument, specifically for devout Hindus who believe the instrument is Sarasvati, the Goddess of Music. While this explanation might not translate to why a Muslim or Christian tabla player uses a langot, almost all musicians regards their instrument with some degree of reverence. Think of your friends who play guitar or drums, and do not like when you touch or play their instrument. It can be conceived that being overprotective about an instrument is a sign of respect for that instrument. (Yes, the most notable exception of an absence of respect for the instrument is Jimi Hendrix, as he was famous for lighting his guitar on fire on stage...hence, why Ravi Shankar was appalled by Hendrix). The drums always are stored in a box or protective bag. Furthermore, a cushion, called a gaddian, cover the head of the drums. Clearly, great care is given to the tabla set.

With all that in mind, let me tell you my story...

At around ten in the morning, Chandran and I went to a music shop in Triplicane, a neighborhood in Eastern Chennai, just minutes from Marina Beach. The owner of the shop, Abdul Karim, has been a tabla crafter his whole life. Not surprisingly, his father owned the shop before him, and his grandfather owned it before his father. For Abdul Karim, this is a familial trade: making drums is in his blood.

Interestingly enough, Abdul's son is not going to take over the business, but rather his daughter is. To be honest, the details of why or how that decision was made were ambiguous. I was very curious to find out, but in India, questions pertinent to the structure of a family business might be deemed inappropriate. Abdul did say his son was studying to be an engineer, but again, I wonder if that disappoints Abdul or not. In hindsight, I regret not asking those specific questions, but recognize that it was a sticky situation.

Regardless, it was really amazing to hear that his daughter would eventually run the business. This is reflective of how the rigidity of the social structure of instrument craftsmen has changed dramatically over the years. I cannot imagine that in 1908, or 1808 for that matter, a daughter would take over a family trade.

The shop was a standard, dusty drum shop. There were wooden drum shells stacked and scattered throughout the narrow room. On the left-hand wall, there was a very high shelf overflowing with all sorts of percussion instruments. Although they specialize in tabla, mridangam and dholak drums, there were about a half-dozen sitars/sarods (stringed instruments). In the shop, they craft all of the wooden shells and heads: so everything for the tabla (right) drum is made on site. For the duggi (left) drum, they buy the metal shells from a famous drum shop in Hyderabad.

There was no religious iconography in the shop; but, that makes perfect sense, as Abdul and his family are Muslims. (I have visited larger music shops in Chennai that are owned by Hindus, and thus have various religious figures and pictures scattered throughout the shop). Abdul's shop also serves as the family's home: everyone lives upstairs.

Chandran has known Abdul for over fifteen years, so that worked to my benefit when negotiating the price of the drums. After spending some time in the shop, I concluded that it would be best to get a copper duggi. The drum is absolutely beautiful, as it has been hand-hammered with an imperfectly perfect pattern of indentations to augment the sound. The tabla (right) drums are more nondescript: aside from the pitch of the drum, there is not a tremendous range of kinds of tabla, unlike the several choices of materials for the shell of a duggi (left) drum. I decided to get a tabla (right) drum tuned to C. After having played on the drums for several days, I am really happy with my decision, as they sound incredible!

These drums would cost five, maybe even ten times as much in New York City. I actually have shipped my tabla set home, and they already arrived safely thanks to DHL. I cannot wait to play them more upon my return.

In all truth, I did not realize that there was such a diversity of materials to make a tabla, and it was a real treat to have such an extensive look into the crafting of a tabla set.

---

### **January 8, 2008**

Since the New Year, I have taken several tabla lessons with Chandran. It has been a real treat to learn how to play this drum – although I will be the first to admit that I do not “know” how to play the tabla, as it takes years of studying even to *begin* to understand the instrument. The tabla is my favorite percussion instrument; I have always been fascinated by the sound of the drum and seemingly infinite possibilities of rhythms of the drum.

I must admit that one of the most basic elements of playing the tabla, the positioning of the body, is very difficult for me. When I practice with Chandran, I can only sit for about thirty minutes or so before I need to stretch my legs! Because in Western society children are taught to sit in chairs, and not on the ground, we grow up with a different capacity of

flexibility than most Indians. For many people, Eastern or Western, this is not a big deal; but for those who know me, I have very long legs and extensive cross-legged sitting can be a problem for me! Oh well...

The coordination of the various finger moments and positioning is a tremendous challenge, to say the least. I recognize that a true student of the tabla spends countless hours every day to perfect the mechanics of playing the tabla. As I understand the complexity of the training, I do not let myself get overwhelmed when I struggle to play something correctly. Further, like all instruments, tabla is best played with a clear mind.

As I have written in an earlier post, the different finger strokes, called bols, each produce a unique sound. There are eleven “main” bols; although, I only know of about half of them (I would never claim to truly “know” any bol). Each bol (finger stroke) can be played on a different part of the drum, so there are a multitude of combinations of sounds that can be made. There are three parts of the drumhead that are played: the edge of tabla (called the kinar), the interior white portion of the head (called the chantii) and the black circle in the middle of the head (called the siyahi). The pitch of the drum is highest on the edge of the drum.

Since my first lesson, Chandran always asserts to get the proper tone out of the drum, the bol (the finger stroke) must be done as quickly and tightly as possible. Your finger must never rest on the head of the drum. “It is like you are touching fire,” Chandran has told me. “Or like [the movement of] a snake.” It can be very strenuous to always have the fingers hovering above the drum without any support.

In another life, I would love to dedicate forty-plus hours a week to studying the tabla. The paradoxically “gift and curse” of the tabla is that because, in my opinion, it is the most expansive and complicated percussion instrument, it does sound the best; nevertheless, the tabla requires an unprecedented level of dedication just to play it on an elementary level and get the proper sounds out of the drums. I know that when I get back to New York, I will be practicing tabla when I can; yet, I do wish I could *really* learn how to play

this instrument. That being said, I am thrilled to have had the opportunity to learn more about the tabla.

---

### **January 15, 2008**

I have theory: on any given day, somewhere in India, there is a festival. Whether it is to venerate a god, to commemorate a local hero, or simply to celebrate life, India is teeming with festivities.

Throughout South India in mid-January, Pongal, a four-day festival, is celebrated. (Pongal actually is celebrated throughout India, but my writing is only in reference to the Pongal of Tamil Nadu). Originating as an annual harvest festival, Pongal has become much more than a simple celebration of farmers' crops. Like many Indian festivals, Pongal is a medley of music, dance, food, and parade after parade. Without a doubt, Pongal is a religious festival with specific rituals and actions that uphold the values and traditions of Hinduism.

In actuality, each of the four days of Pongal is dedicated to a different god within the Hindu pantheon. Bhogi Pongal, the first day, pays tribute to Indra, the rain god. It should be noted that labeling any Hindu god with one characteristic, like "rain god," is rather misleading, as whatever each Hindu deity represents is dependent on what sect of Hinduism is observed. For example, Indra also can be recognized as the "war god" or "king of the gods." Yet, in this instance, in Tamil Nadu, Indra is revered as the god of rain.

Unequivocally, Surya Pongal, the second day of the festival, is the most important day. Similar to pagan festivals around the world, Surya Pongal pays reverence to the Sun, for sustaining the growth of crops; and even more broadly, for nurturing all of existence. "Surya" literally means "Sun." This day is the most exciting of all the days, as there are the many processions throughout the streets.

The third day of the festival, Mattu Pongal, honors cows by decorating them with all sorts of bells and whistles (literally). One has to wonder whether a cow truly appreciates being painted; regardless, the bovine receive attention normally reserved for the divine. It is quite the sight indeed.

While the entire festival is an elaborate worshipping of the gods (or more specifically, the Sun), the final day, Kannum Pongal focuses on the family and the food. In a certain sense, Kannum Pongal is very similar to the American holiday of Thanksgiving. The word “Pongal” literally translates as “boiling over.” Thus, the name of the festival is symbolic of being thankful for the abundance of food provided by the harvest.

During the four days, many families create small shrines outside their doorways, ranging from candle arrangements to decorative paintings, called kolam. The kolam designs are made from brightly colored powders. Many streets are lined with lights, as well.

The music of Pongal is folk music; I will write more on the specifics in the following post on my Pongal experiences.

---

### **January 16, 2008**

Like all Indian festivals, Pongal is a sensory overload: the sounds, smells and sights engulf your entire being. What is special about observing these festivals is the unexpected: indeed, I often do not know what to anticipate, especially in regards to the music. To be honest, I am not really sure how to share all of my Pongal experiences; so, here are just a couple short stories and observations from the festival. My apologies if there is a serious lack of transition from paragraph to paragraph...

During one of the afternoons of Pongal, I was walking with a Dutch friend around Marina Beach. As I was telling him the single most valuable lesson I have learned from traveling throughout India – never, ever be surprised by anything – a procession with fireworks

and a band came from out of nowhere. And yes, the explosions of the fireworks were too close for comfort...

Throughout Pongal, there are buses that go from the city to the surrounding villages. Many people actually leave Chennai to visit their families outside of the city. Not surprisingly, the public buses are packed with people; and many of these people are the festival musicians. So, quite frequently, a bus will drive by and there will be musicians onboard who are practicing...

On each night of Pongal, I watched the festivities in my neighborhood, Royapettah, which is in central Chennai. On all three nights, there was music; and while on all three nights the drumming was the same, the accompanying instruments were different. The drums were rather interesting, as one side was played with fingers and the other with a stick. The drums themselves have a very sharp, distinct sound, as the heads are made from a very thick oxen skin.

I was a little surprised to see a Western saxophone played during one of the religious processions; yet, as I already have written, I have learned to never, ever be surprised by anything in India. Even if traditionally a saxophone has no place in a Hindu temple, India, more so than anywhere else in the world, has a profound ability to adapt and absorb aspects of contemporary culture. On the most basic level, music is music; what does it matter what instrument is used in a religious ritual or ceremony?

I readily admit that the former sentence somewhat undermines the foundations of my research; yet, there is a certain truth that music does change with the time. Of course, it seems that the percussion instruments used in the festival still are “traditional” Indian instruments...

As you will witness in the videos, this procession, filmed in Royapettah, simply goes from the temple to the main road, only about three blocks or so. Throughout the city,

there are dozens of similar displays: remember, Indians always seize the opportunity to partake in a festival!

While I would have liked to have seen the evening celebrations in other neighborhoods, it was really neat to see the same one three nights in a row. Often, for many obvious reasons, I feel very much an outsider at these religious rituals and musical performances; yet, as I had been living in Royapettah for almost a month, to a minimal but existent degree, I did feel a part of the community. I knew several of the children and adults who were organizing and participating in the event.

On the last night, I actually was invited to perform the puja – wafting the smoke above my head three times and eating the prasada. It was a refreshing change to no longer feel like I was just an academic looking in, but instead a participant in the Pongal festivities.

---

### **January 19, 2008**

Chandran, my tabla instructor, earns a bulk of his livelihood by performing “light” music. Although he is classically trained, Chandran thoroughly enjoys playing light music – which, essentially, is nonreligious, pop music. Light music is most often performed at weddings and other social functions; the music itself consists mostly of covers of popular Bollywood (film) songs.

So, I accompanied Chandran to a Hindu wedding – my second in the past five months. Like my experience in Fiji, I was the only Westerner at the event. That being said, like so many other situations, I definitely felt welcomed. Actually, I attended the wedding celebration, not the service itself; but the party is always the most important part, right?

It was interesting to watch Chandran set up his tabla set and other percussion instruments. Because the light music is very melodic, as it is really just pop music, Chandran used five different tabla (right-handed) drums, so that he had a wide range of pitches to play with. He even tuned a dholak accordingly (to A on the music scale), and basically used it as a

sixth tabla. In a purely religious setting, like that of a performance at a temple, a tabla player would most definitely not have so many tabla (right-handed) drums to work with, as the melody is not essential to Carnatic or Hindustani music; or rather, the melody is not the responsibility of the tabla player.

Considering the traditional roots of the tabla, the versatility of the instrument is quite impressive: surely, the tabla is classical instrument – it must be remembered that Carnatic and Hindustani music are the equivalent of Western classical music, like that of Schubert or Mozart. Nonetheless, the tabla does not sound out of place in a contemporary context. Indeed, there is a certain paradox of the tabla, as it is able to juxtapose itself, by functioning in both traditional and contemporary music.

Aside from the tabla, Chandran also used a variety of percussion instruments, including some small bongos, a set of tom toms, and shakers. Interestingly enough, the shakers were just old aerosol cans filled with rice; very resourceful, indeed. Also, the band had another drummer, named Madhavan, who played an electronic drum pad. Madhavan said that normally he plays an acoustic kit for his performances, but was unable to get one for this show.

Truth be told, the sound quality was pretty poor, so that was a little disappointing. Further, light music is almost a glorified karaoke, as just about anyone is welcome to grab the mic and sing his or her favorite Bollywood hit. Regardless, it was very entertaining to see my first light music performance. I thought it was interesting that although it was a light music performance, there still was a framed picture of Sarasvati, the Hindu Goddess of Music, on the stage.

I must admit, the groom did fairly well with his dowry: there was a motorcycle, television, refrigerator, washing machine, and much more. It is funny because I think I now have been to more Hindu weddings than “American” weddings...

---

**January 20, 2008**

Some of my contacts have come about in the most random fashion: while taking a taxi ride from Chennai to Pondicherry, as I was explaining why I was in India, my driver told me that one of his closest friends was a drummer. After spending a few days in Pondi, I returned on to Chennai, and met with a thirty-something year-old drummer named Ashok.

Fortunately, Ashok lives in Royapettah, the same neighborhood I have been living in Chennai, so it was not too difficult finding his house. Initially, I was under the impression that Ashok was trained in Indian hand drums, like the tabla or dholak; but, it turned out that he actually studies the Western drum kit. I had yet to meet an Indian musician that exclusively played Western style drums.

Ashok has been playing drums for many years; but asserts that it only has been “six full years,” as that is how long he has studied under his teacher, Goal Sivamani, one of the most respected Indian drummers. Sivamani is a very accomplished recording artist, and, like many famous Indian musicians, is from Chennai. It was unclear how often Ashok plays with Sivamani; nonetheless, the way Ashok spoke of Sivamani, it was clear that Ashok greatly respected and admired his teacher.

The guru–shishya (teacher–student) relationship is an essential aspect of Indian culture. With any sort of musical apprenticeship, there is an inherent spiritual training: like all great student-teacher relationships, much more is learned than the said subject. This explains why Ashok was so curious as to whom my teacher was; because in India, a drum teacher is more than a drum teacher.

All that aside, for a couple of hours, Ashok and I jammed on his drum kit. Ashok actually had a really large kit: it was a standard five piece (snare, bass, two rack toms and a floor tom), plus a trio of marching toms above the snare, and two timbales above the floor tom. Considering the size of his apartment, his kit was absolutely massive.

Not surprisingly, as Ashok lives in a government housing complex, he needs to muffle the drums, so that the neighbors do not complain. To minimize the sound, Ashok wraps all of the drums and cymbals with dishtowels and other cloths. It is a rather clever system; although, it makes playing the drums much, much more difficult, as your sticking speed is reduced dramatically from the resistance of the cloth.

While it was extremely refreshing to get behind a drum kit, after several months without proper practice, my chops were rather rusty. Ashok sounded very good; his stick control was outstanding. In Western drumming, the two most common strokes are the single stroke (the drum makes one sound with one stroke/hit) and double stroke (two sounds with one stroke). Ashok has been practicing triple, quadruple, quintuple and sextuple strokes; all which sound really awesome.

One of the most frustrating aspects of this fellowship is that I am always surrounded by drums and percussion; yet, I have very few opportunities to play a proper drum kit. Further, as expected, my research predominantly focuses on hand percussion, which is why I seldom am exposed to full drum kits.

It has worked out that in each country where I have conducted research, I have had at least one opportunity to play a drum kit: in Fiji, I gave drum lessons at a church on Kadavu; in Japan, I jammed with students on roof of the University of Kyoto of Art & Design; and in India, I was able to play on a muffled kit with Ashok.

As much as I am enjoying my travels right now, I cannot wait to get home so that I can play for hours while applying my new knowledge of international percussion to my drum kit.

---

**January 25, 2008**

After spending over a month in Chennai, I have departed for the state of Goa. I had no idea that Carnival was celebrated in India. Although it was the Portuguese Catholics that

introduced the holiday to India, today, Carnival is celebrated by Christians, Hindus and Muslims all throughout the state of Goa – and apparently, in Kerala, as well. To the best of my knowledge, India is the only country in Asia that celebrates Carnival.

I was able to see two processions: one in the small beach town of Anjuna, and another in the larger town of Mapusa. The Anjuna celebration was so small that it seemed as if there were more participants than spectators. In Mapusa, on the other hand, the streets were packed with people, both watching and partaking in the festivities.

Like Carnival celebrations everywhere, it really was just a whacky, but wildly fun, gathering. The processions include many floats with dancers, musicians, and individuals dressed in elaborate costumes.

I was a little disappointed that there was not any live, acoustic drumming. To my surprise, there were actually several drummers playing electronic kits, while parading on the back of the floats. It almost seemed like it would be more complicated to use an electronic drum kit than an acoustic one in a parade. For whatever reason, the drummers opted for electronic kits: maybe this was a sign of modernity eclipsing certain drumming traditions. Regardless of that, the music still was an intricate and essential part of the celebration.

Of course, there was a certain “Indian” dynamic to the festival: maybe it was because the procession in Anjuna had a sign that read, “VIVE CARNIVAL 2008,” or because a float in Mapusa declared, “HAPPY CARNAVAL.” Either way, it was a pleasant surprise to see Carnival, the Indian way...

---

### **January 30, 2008**

A few months ago, I met a jazz drummer from Sydney, Australia named Jamie Cameron. I have heard some of Jamie’s records, and he truly is a fantastic drummer. During our conversation, Jamie told me that he had just come back from studying the janggoo drum

in Korea. (The janggoo is actually a drum widely used in Japanese music; many historians believe that the Koreans introduced music to the Japanese, thus explaining why both cultures share an instrument).

Jamie told me how much he respected the Korean janggoo drum, because it has such a rich history. Then he said something that really struck me: he affirmed, “I think that we [Western drummers] have no idea how to play the drums.” Essentially, his theory is that the Korean janggoo drum has been played for centuries, and thus has been perfected. The Western drum kit, on the other hand, is a very new instrument, as it is not even one hundred years old. The first drum kits – a snare, tom toms, pedal-driven bass drum, high-hat and ride cymbal – came onto the music scene about a hundred years ago.

When Jamie told me his theory – something that I think actually is not a theory, because I have no doubt it is the truth –, I told him that the Indian tabla upholds his hypothesis. The tabla is another drum that has been played for ages; there is a very specific way to learn the tabla, the teachings have been perfected. Most drummers will agree that the musicianship it takes to play an Indian tabla or Korean janggoo drum is simply at another level to that of a Western drum kit. While the physical coordination of Western drums may be more challenging than any other percussion instrument, as Western drums require the command of hands and feet, the Indian tabla or Korean janggoo have a more specific school of training.

In no way am I asserting that Indian percussionists are “better” than Western drummers; nothing in music should ever be compared, as music is not a competition. Nonetheless, due to the rich history of Indian drumming, it is fair to say that instruments like the tabla are far more evolved than the Western drum kit.

The tabla can produce a euphonious range of sound because everything from the technique of the tuning to the mastery of method of playing has been tried and tested over centuries and centuries. As with any aspect of life, with further years of study, more is known and that knowledge can be applied to the practice.

Don't get me wrong, when Jamie first told me his theory, I could not help but highlight the incredible skills of jazz drummers like Buddy Rich, Elvin Jones and David King. But what Jamie was saying, was that those drummers are just the beginning – that in a few centuries, Western drummers will be doing unimaginable things on the drum kit.

---

### **FINAL REFLECTIONS ON SOUTH INDIA**

A flurry of thoughts of my experience in India come to mind: in no way is this post a cohesive coda, but rather it is an informal reaction to my time in India...

One of the most underrated aspects of traveling throughout India is that I have found so many awesome records that I would never find back in the States. Indeed, we live in an era of globalization; yet, sometimes I am overwhelmed with how much music I encounter here that I would never be exposed to back in New York City. On those terms, I have discovered a ton of fantastic Indian percussionists, including Palghat T.S. Mani Iyer and Guru Kaaraikkudi Mani – all of whom I was unaware of prior to my arrival in South India.

Furthermore, I have attended so many concerts of local artists – all professional musicians, yet not internationally promoted. There is something very special about seeing a performance and knowing that it is an isolated opportunity: I cannot go to Virgin Records in Union Square and buy the records of these drummers.

Perhaps one of the more frustrating aspects of this fellowship is knowing that I will never be able to convey so many of my experiences on this website. I have seen so many things that are pertinent to my research, but I just haven't been able to write about every detail. For example, while in Goa, I saw several concerts by Western Shivaite converts – Westerners who converted to Hinduism, and worship Shiva by playing music (amongst other things...). Yet, I have been unable to figure out where this group fits into my research. Either way, there has not been a shortage of music-related experiences while in



southern part of the country. Because of its proximity to Africa, there are many immigrants from Morocco and West Africa in Sevilla; which creates a very diverse music scene.

One evening, I stumbled upon a small music club, Reggae Vibes, and watched a percussion performance by a group from Sierra Leone. The group, called African Shrine, mostly played djembes – large wooden and calfskin hand drums. The djembe jam lasted about an hour, and there was also a fire show. All in all, it was very entertaining and a rather unexpected evening.

---

### **February 15, 2008**

During my stay in Sevilla, I discovered a small drum shop, called Naranjo Music. The shop mostly sells Western-style drum kits and accessories; but there was a wide selection of African hand drums, as well.

Historically, all of Andalucia, formerly known as “Al-Andalus,” has had a profound connection to Northern Africa and the Islamic world, in general. Indeed, this is not the proper forum to discuss the broader cultural influences that Islam had on Christian Spain from the Eighth Century to 1492; nonetheless, this history has, invariably, created ties between the Andalucian and North African music.

Although there was a good selection of African drums, the one drum that caught my eye was the most unconventional: it was a pair of tom-tom drums made from PVC water pipes. Like a timbale set (think Tito Puente), a pair of cowbells and six-inch splash cymbal was mounted above the two drums.

The pipe drum set certainly would be classified as a “found instrument,” as the materials used to create the drum were never intended to be used for that purpose. To give the drum an even more makeshift feel to it, the pipes were colored in with marker, not paint. Somewhat surprisingly, the sound of the drums was pretty solid.

Of course I have seen pipes transformed into drum shells before, there was something about this particular set that just seemed like such an “honest” effort by the craftsman. Rarely do innovation and practicality form such a straightforward marriage.

While this drum does not boast any aesthetic value, the ingenuity of the materials used to create the instrument is highly commendable. Surely, the drum does not define the drummer: the music coming out of the drum is all that matters.

Drums can be crafted for thousands and thousands of dollars, but at the same time, they can be crafted from household materials for next to nothing. It is rather incredible to analyze the spectrum of drum crafting: when I think how complex (and costly) the process of drum crafting at Asano Taiko in Japan was to the simple (and cheap) process of crafting the pipe drum, it is really neat to see such variation. But, it seems that sometimes simplicity just works best when crafting a drum.

And perhaps the greatest testament to the crafter’s love for percussion is the fact that the drum was not even for sale!

---

**March 14, 2008**

I am so grateful to have autonomy of my research: the Bristol Fellowship coordinator at Hamilton College, Ginny Dosch, has given me a tremendous degree of flexibility in regards to my itinerary. In my original fellowship proposal, I had no idea that I would want to venture to Amsterdam for a series of concerts. Fortunately, I was able to fit this side trip into my schedule.

From March 14<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup>, Kodo, the taiko drum group I worked with while in Japan, played three concerts in Amsterdam with a Dutch pop rock group, called Bløf. (I think Jerry Seinfeld said it best, “What is that O with the line through it? What letter is that? I don’t remember learning that letter in grade school.”)

The shows were not just merely Kodo as the opening act for Bløf; instead, the two groups collaborated and performed many songs together, fusing traditional Japanese drumming with modern Dutch rock music. Needless to say, this fusion created a tremendous visual and auditory experience.

To take a step back: ever since I first ventured to India in the fall of 2005, I have been amazed by the concept of fusion music. I was initially turned on to fusion music by the godfather of the genre itself, George Harrison. Harrison's records, both with the Beatles and throughout this solo career, reflected a sincere interest in Indian music.

Fusion music is very difficult to create: above all, among the musicians, there must be a genuine interest and appreciation between the two schools of music. For example, George Harrison was so successful in making fusion music, as he studied the sitar as any other rising Indian student would; as in, he did not exploit his "rock star" status, and simply play the sitar as if it were a guitar.

In purest sense, the purpose of drums is to communicate. With fusion music, cross-cultural communication is a given, as two different forms of music are mixed and mashed together. In the context of the Kodo-Bløf performances, it was apparent that a very special personal connection among the Japanese and Dutch musicians was forged through the music.

It was very much so evident that the members of Bløf had a sincere enthusiasm for Japanese taiko music. Not only did the music sound fantastic, but also it was clear that all the musicians were having a blast, as everyone on stage wore nothing but smiles. By the final night, during the big drum solo between Kodo and Bløf drummer Norman Bonink, Norman was even wearing a traditional Japanese headband!

Within the parameters of research "spirituality in drumming and drum crafting," it might be questionable as to what was the "spiritual" element to the Kodo-Bløf performances.

Spirituality has the connotation of the individual's connection to the Divine; yet, in a certain sense, can "spirituality" also implicate a more personal connection between two humans? To clarify, there is something wholly "spiritual" about two people forming such a strong, personal connection, especially when that bond breaks down cultural barriers. Surely, "spirituality" is a rather ambiguous term and concept; but, after witnessing the Kodo-Bløf performances, I affirm that a "spiritual" union can be formed between two people, vis-à-vis music.

---

### **March 14-16, 2008**

On the early evening of March 14<sup>th</sup>, I arrived at the Heineken Music Hall in South Amsterdam. I picked up my tickets for the performances on the 14<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup>; I had been unable to buy a ticket for the 15<sup>th</sup>, as the show had sold out very quickly (all three shows were sold out eventually). Coincidentally, Jun Aukimoto, one Kodo's tour managers, was at the ticket will call window when I arrived; Mr. Aukimoto and I had been in correspondence over the past month, and he had generously arranged to have a ticket for me for the show on the 15<sup>th</sup>. It turned out that Mr. Aukimoto gave me a VIP pass (for all three shows) that included access to the after party on Sunday night (I will get to that later). So, a big, BIG thanks to Jun Aukimoto and Gen Matsui of Kodo; I cannot express how much I appreciated their help to ensure that I was able to attend all three shows!

A little background information about Bløf: they are one of the most successful Dutch bands. In a way, I would describe them as the Dutch version of U2. The band itself is comprised of Paskal Jakobsen (vocals/guitar), Peter Slager (bass/vocals), Bas Kennis (piano/vocals) and Norman Bonink (drums/vocals).

The Heineken Music Hall (HMH), which basically looks a large box with metal panels and concrete floors, has a capacity of about five thousand people. Directly in front of the stage is a floor with fold-up seats; there are two levels of balconies in the rear; and VIP balconies on the left and right sides of the concert hall. With the obvious exception of the

VIP balconies, there are no assigned seats throughout the venue. Regardless of where you choose to sit, the acoustics are superb.

On the first night, I sat on the floor, seven rows from the right side of the stage. It was absolutely incredible to be so close to the stage. For the three Kodo concerts I attended in Japan in December, I was all the way up in the balcony at each venue (in Hiroshima, Okayama, and Osaka). It is true that the acoustics (as in, the projection of the sound from the drums) is better if you are further away from the stage; yet, it was most excellent to be able to see all of the facial expressions and body movements of the musicians.

On the second night at the HMH, I opted to sit in the upper rear balcony. Although I was rather far from the stage, I enjoyed the distanced vantage point, as it allowed me to have a full, unobstructed view of the stage. On Sunday, the final night, I took advantage of my VIP pass, and sat on the VIP balcony on the right side of the stage. (Yes, the seats were much more comfortable there).

It was great to watch each performance from three distinct perspectives; this certainly made each night feel very unique. Nonetheless, I will readily admit that, when watching Kodo perform, the closer to the stage you are, the more intense (and thus, more memorable) the experience is. Being so close to the stage allows you to feel the vibrations of the sound waves resonating from the taiko drums.

Start to finish, the set lists were relatively identical throughout the three nights. In short, there were four Bløf “solo” songs, five Kodo “solo” songs, and eleven songs performed by both groups. Because almost every song had a different arrangement of instruments/combination of musicians, there were many stage adjustments. It was rather impressive to see how fluidly the transitions were; there was almost no time wasted in between songs to set up the stage. Interestingly enough, only Kodo members moved the taiko drums; the regular stage crew never touched any of Kodo’s drums.

(The following is applicable for all three nights of performances).

The set list was flawless: it was a perfect showcase for the members of Kodo and Bløf to demonstrate their talents individually and in tandem. (It should be noted that the way the musical arrangements worked was that Kodo played with Bløf; as in, the Japanese drummers learned Bløf's songs. Bløf did not "learn" or "add on" to Kodo songs, with one notable exception that I will discuss later).

What was most effective about the set list was that there was a tremendous amount of variation. To get an idea of how the concert worked, here is a rough version of set list:

1. Both groups begin on stage together; a very cool taiko beat with the pop rock beat
2. Bløf song
3. Kodo jam; about fifteen minutes
4. Bløf song with two female Kodo members, one on a Japanese slide guitar and the other providing additional vocals
5. Bløf song; apparently a big hit, as the crowd knew every word
6. Bløf song with one Kodo member on the Japanese slide guitar again
7. Kodo jam; about ten minutes (I recognized this one from the December concerts)
8. Kodo & Bløf melodic interlude, with two Kodo members playing the flute
9. Bløf song
10. Bløf song; duet with female Kodo member; Shogo (of Kodo) on the violin
11. Kodo song; famous number played on the giant o-daiko drum
12. Bløf song
13. Kodo jam with Bløf's drummer playing various taiko drums. West meets East, indeed!
14. Kodo and Bløf end the first set together; crowd chants, "We want more!"
15. First encore: both groups together for slow song
16. Kodo jam
17. Kodo and Bløf together
18. Second encore: Kodo song performed by female vocalist and string player
19. Kodo drummers parade through the audience; jam with Bløf's drummer (with him on the drum kit)

## 20. Kodo and Bløf come together for the big finale

Without a doubt, the zenith of the concert was when Norman, Bløf's drummer, played several different taiko drums during an extended Kodo solo. Norman was extremely fluid on the taiko drums; it was clear that he had practiced a great deal before the performance. It was inspiring to see Norman so engrossed while playing; not to mention how cool it was to see the Kodo members fully embrace him. Hands down, this was the most memorable aspect of the show.

Another highlight was during the second encore, when Kodo played a song with Bløf's drummer on the drum kit. The thunderous taiko beat incorporated with the rhythm of a full drum was phenomenal: percussive fusion at its finest.

During the fusion songs, it seemed that that the less complicated the Bløf drumbeats were, the more creative Kodo could be. In a certain sense, secondary drumming is for rhythm what harmony is for melody: thus, Kodo provided a "rhythmic" harmony for the Bløf songs.

I had seen several of the same Kodo songs performed back in December; yet, these versions were definitely different, specifically in the length of the song and number of drummers performing. The music of Kodo tends to challenge the notion of sound and perception: the drummers both will play their instruments as loudly and as softly as possible. Kodo performed many classics, including "Zoku," "Kyosui," and "Floor" – okay, I admit that you probably haven't heard of any of those songs, but they are all wonderful!

Patience is needed to listen to taiko in order to appreciate the flow of the movements of each composition. Many pieces are very long, and thus require much attention to fully enjoy the trajectory of the song. One of the Kodo jams last almost fifteen minutes: of course I could listen to straight percussion for hours, but I would have assumed that many people do not differentiate a cacophonous din from a symphonious rhythm. Nonetheless,

it was clear that even during the extended Kodo solos, the audience was continually captivated.

It felt as if everyone in the venue – musician and ticket holder alike – were all completely absorbed by the music. Throughout the entire evening, the audience was very responsive to both the fusion songs and Kodo solo pieces. It should be noted that Bløf attracts an older fan base. Marinating in Eastern and Western rhythms for two-and-a-half hours can be an invigorating, yet taxing, experience. By the end of each night, I was exhausted!

There was a definite element of humor to the concerts; a sense of “light-heartedness” prevailed throughout the performances. For example, after the first extensive Kodo drum solo, the Bløf lead singer/guitarist, Paskal Jakobsen, made a joke in Dutch that I did not fully understand – although I did recognize that he was poking fun at the strenuous effort of the Kodo drummers, as he used the word, “workout.” It is absolutely true that taiko drumming requires an exceptional amount of endurance, as it is a very physical activity.

Kudos to Bløf for creating more international exposure for Kodo: I do not doubt that Kodo’s popularity in the Netherlands will skyrocket after these concerts. Everything about this concert series was executed so perfectly. The production of the shows was stellar: everything from the background videos to the lighting to the mixing of the audio tracks was excellent. Even during Bløf’s solo rock songs it was just cool to see giant taiko drums in the background. By the final night, there were definitely a bunch of the Bløf songs that were stuck in my head; the band has some very catchy hooks!

It was so wonderful to be able to see all three performances because during each song, so much music had been played, as there were often around eight to ten musicians on stage. Furthermore, no two songs sounded the same. Throughout the three nights, I was able to focus on different parts and layers of each song.

The after party on Sunday night was a really nice conclusion to a great weekend – it was also nice to get free food, as I had skipped supper that evening! Because there was a



Last week, in Rabat, I met Younes Boumeahdi, one of the directors at Hit Radio, the first hip-hop and R&B radio station in Morocco. Founded in July 2006, Hit Radio strives to promote up-and-coming Moroccan artists.

Like hip-hop in other parts of the world, the music reflects the urban struggles of the younger generations. Some artists, like Hakim from Rabat and Fnaire from Marrakesh, incorporate traditional elements of Moroccan music into the beats of their contemporary music. The marriage of rap and “classical” Moroccan music is an intriguing enterprise. That being said, throughout American hip hop, it is very common for the beat to sample Western classical music – just think of all of the string sections employed in a beat by Dr. Dre or RZA of the Wu-Tang Clan.

Although Hit Radio only broadcasts contemporary music, Younes does know many traditional musicians, most of whom are based in Marrakesh. Younes asserted that many young Moroccans were “fed up” with the traditional music scene, and thus, had a greater interest in genres of music like hip-hop. For years, the Moroccan government had been hesitant to approve a hip-hop radio station – deeming it to be a potentially bad influence on the youth of Morocco. Nonetheless, since Hit Radio was inaugurated, it has flourished and fostered the growth of the Moroccan music scene.

Aside from establishing several contacts for me, Younes generously offered to provide a pass for the “Mawazine, Rhythms of the World Festival,” which is from May 16<sup>th</sup> to 24<sup>th</sup> in Rabat. I am really looking forward to attending that festival; I will write more about it as it approaches.

Two days ago, I went back to Hit Radio and met a man named Dominique, who is French. Dominique works to promote and develop contemporary Moroccan music; and also, helps form the weekly playlists for Hit Radio. Dominique also provided me with several potential contacts for my research. So a big thanks to everyone at Hit Radio!

---

**March 29, 2009**

In almost every sense imaginable, Morocco is a mixture of cultures. For centuries, this country has absorbed the musical flavors of countless external influences. In short, the many dimensions of Moroccan music can be traced back to Berber, Arab, Andalusian and West African origins. The parallels between Morocco and New York City are unavoidable: both places represent the pinnacle of multiculturalism.

Two weekends ago, Amine and I went to a party (more accurately, a small gathering) in Skhirat, a beach town just south of Rabat. The evening was hosted by a self-proclaimed music fanatic, Bashir. For the party, Bashir hired two Gnaoua musicians to perform; I had never seen a live Gnaoua performance before. It was my first real taste of the West African influence on Moroccan culture.

What exactly is Gnaoua music, you ask. Before I continue with my experiences at Bashir's house, I will do my very best to define Gnaoua music.

Anthropologically speaking, the term "Gnaoua" (pronounced ga-na-wah) directly refers to the Sub-Saharan communities that either were enslaved and brought to, or naturally emigrated to, Morocco, around the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. Originally, Gnaoua music was a West African pagan concept; that is to say, it was music performed at various rituals and healing ceremonies.

For the music performance, two instruments were used: the karkaba, a pair of small metal cymbals played with the hands, which is almost like a clave. The genbri, a three stringed bass guitar, was also played. The genbri is made from calfskin and the wood of a fig tree. The music of the genbri is supposed to evoke the spirit of the tree – a very pagan concept, indeed. The music is laden with improvised rhythms; many handclaps are scattered throughout each piece without a following a definitive time signature or meter.

The lyrics of the songs, sung in Arabic, pertain to the unlimited power and benevolence of God, and often tell stories of the Prophet Mohammed. When I asked Bashir if any of

the lyrics were taken directly from the Qu'ran, I received an emphatic, "Absolutely not," as my answer. "That would be sacrilege," I was told.

Many centuries ago, Gnaoua was sung in West African languages and the contents of the lyrics pertained to themes of West African religions. Needless to say, Morocco has had a profound influence on the evolution of Gnaoua music.

In the bluntest sense, the purpose of Gnaoua music is what is called "hadra" – for the individual to become aware of the presence of the Lord. Within the tenets of Islam, God is everywhere at all times; yet, as mere mortals, we often fail to recognize omnipresent nature of the Divine. Through the vibrations of the music, we are able to focus on the tangibility of God. The music provides a medium for this consecrated connection: this, of course, is a very powerful feeling. Hence, many of the performers often fall into a deep trance.

The songs build on top of themselves; as in, as the music progresses, the beat moves faster and faster. The songs themselves can last anywhere from several minutes to several hours: most certainly, the repetition creates a hypnotic essence to the music.

The ultimate goal of performing Gnaoua music is to create a mystical union between the musician and God. Not surprisingly, many of Gnaoua musicians are devout Sufis – Sufism is the mystical sect of Islam. The staple of Sufism affirms that every individual is capable of having a personal relationship with God.

To become a true gnaoua musician, there is a rigorous training process: the master and disciple maintain a very close relationship. According to Bashir, among gnaoua musicians, there is, "a very codified way of being."

I was lucky enough to witness a performance by an authentic maalem, master of Gnaoua. Tonight's performance featured Adbel Kader, the maalem, and Said, the cuyo (the disciple). Because of the vast amount of tourism throughout Morocco, there are many

individuals who claim to be a maalem – yet, in all truth, the number of maalem is very few, as the commercialization of Gnaoua music has undermined its spiritual nature. Bashir asserted that among Gnaoua musicians there is an inherent hesitation to advertise their religious tradition.

The candle lit room at Bashir's house provided an intimate setting to showcase the performers. Traditionally, acrobatic dances accompany the music: a tremendous amount of energy is required to perform Gnaoua. That being said, for tonight's performance, there was minimal dancing, as the environment was not exactly conducive for it.

Although Gnaoua is a very serious music, this evening's performance was rather light-hearted. Towards the end of the evening, an up-and-coming twenty-year-old Moroccan blues guitarist performed with the two Gnaoua musicians. Interestingly enough, musicologists have traced the roots of American Blues music back to Gnaoua. Of the past quarter century, several notable Western musicians, including Jimmy Page, Robert Plant and Bill Laswell, have experimented with Gnaoua, to create a new fusion music.

Gnaoua music reflects its West African roots; yet, it is still an Islamic enterprise. On the surface, the marriage of a West African tradition and Islam may seem to be counterintuitive, as many West African religions were polytheistic; nonetheless, these two concepts come together fluidly. That is to say, the common goal of developing a sense of piety and raising awareness of the Divine is reached. The music itself serves as a religious invocation: in the purest sense, Gnaoua strives to create awareness for the Almighty, through the trance of the music.

---

### **April 6, 2008**

A few Fridays back, I met Adil Hanine, the drummer of Hoba Hoba Spirit, at Hotel Pietri, a jazz bar in Rabat. Hoba Hoba Spirit is one of the most popular bands in Morocco right now – they receive constant airplay and even tour internationally. Based out of Casablanca, Hoba's music is a fusion of rock, reggae, hip hop, and Gnaoua. The

influence of Moroccan rhythms gives the band a truly awesome, not to mention unique, sound.

Adil made a guest appearance at Pietri, both on vocals and drums, during the performance of an Afro-Pop band, Super Jungle. After chatting for an hour or so, Adil said I was more than welcome to stay at his house in Casablanca whenever I needed a place to crash. The following Sunday, I left Rabat for Casa.

Hospitality in Morocco is incredible: never have I traveled throughout a country where so many people are eager to provide the lonely traveler accommodation. That Sunday, Adil met me at the Casa Port train station and took me back to his house. A couple of his friends were already over, and for hours we just talked about music, discussing everything from the underrated solo career of John Frusciante to the indispensable contribution George Harrison made to fusion music. It never ceases to amaze me to find people on other continents with such similar musical tastes as my own: music truly is the universal language.

That night, Adil, his Bulgarian wife Tzvety, and I went to a local restaurant/bar to hear live music. The place is a favorite spot amongst local musicians, as there are guitars, drums and microphones already set up. Needless to say, there are many jam sessions featuring Casablanca's finest musicians.

After a delicious mixed grill dinner, I played drums with Adil (who was on bass) and another guitarist. We played songs we all knew, such as "No Woman No Cry," "I Feel Good" and "Wonderful Tonight." As I have not really practiced since I left New York, it was somewhat intimidating to perform in front of thirty to forty people. Nonetheless, it was a blast to be able to play, albeit a brief twenty minutes.

---

**April 8, 2008**

Last week, I was able to attend a practice session of Adil's band, Hoba Hoba Spirit. One of the greatest frustrations of playing drums and being in a band is finding suitable practice space. In urban environments, there are few apartments that are capable of hosting jam sessions, as the noise would disturb the neighbors.

Adil told me that a local, wealthy businessman offered to let the band use a building (that used to be an old mattress showroom) free of charge. The support the band gets from the community is fantastic: it is so great to see that Hoba Hoba Spirit's music is embraced by the locals. As a drummer, that sort of philanthropy makes me smile!

The band was preparing for a show that upcoming weekend in Paris. Although they hadn't played together for about a month, they still sounded very good. They rehearsed their twenty-four song set list: it was really neat to witness this performance in such an intimate setting. The rhythms of Hoba's songs are really outstanding: because of the West African influence on their music, many of the beats are in six, rather than four.

Hoba Hoba Spirit has an especially unique sound because the lyrics are a mix of Arabic, French, and English. Like the international reggae star Manu Chao, lead singer Reda Allali constantly switches languages while singing.

Throughout May and June, I will have several opportunities to see Hoba perform live. I am really excited to witness the energy of their live performances.

---

### **April 27, 2008**

The music of Morocco seems to be infinitely complex: due to the countless internal and external influences, there is a tremendous range in the different genres of music. This explains why the term "Moroccan music" is rather ambiguous, as "Moroccan music" can include influences from Arabian music, Andalusian music, West African music, Rai music (from Algeria) and, of course, the indigenous Berber music.

Even within Berber music, there are many variations: from tribe to tribe, there are different rhythms and melodies. Since my arrival to Morocco, I have met so many individuals – some musicians, some not – who know so much about the music of Morocco, despite the fact that there is so much detailed information to know. That is to say, it seems that throughout the population, there is a certain “common knowledge” about all of the different genres of Moroccan music. It is so impressive that so many people can thoroughly explain the histories of each school of music.

The tremendous level of diversity has led me to believe that, in order to get a true understanding of the music of Morocco, I must remain in the country for three months – the maximum allowed time without a permanent visa.

Therefore, I have extended my stay in Morocco. There are several festivals in June that I am eager to attend, chiefly, the Sacred Music Festival in Fes and Mawazine Rhythm Festival in Rabat. This means, unfortunately, that I have to eliminate Trinidad & Tobago from my itinerary. Nonetheless, I am thrilled to have the opportunity to stay in Morocco for three full months.

---

**May 11, 2008**

This past Saturday, I went to a Hoba Hoba Spirit concert at the Mohammed V Sports Complex in Casablanca. The show was a free concert, but only for girls, twenty-five years old and under.

Around one o'clock, I arrived with Adil at the arena to help set up his equipment. After a brief sound-check, everyone in the band, myself and a few other members of the Hoba entourage, went out for lunch. A few hours later, we returned to an arena packed with about 2,500 screaming girls.

Without a doubt, attending this concert was one of the most profound cultural experiences I have ever had, as, simply put, I have never seen so many hysterical girls in my life! The truth is that young girls in Moroccan society have very limited social outlets. Some women are veiled; some are not – in no way is Morocco a “repressive” society; in fact, aside from Turkey, Morocco is probably the most progressive Muslim country in the world. Nevertheless, it is clear that young women have much fewer opportunities to socialize than young men.

The connection the band had with the (all female) audience was unprecedented: these girls were so absorbed by the music that many of them, literally, passed out. I lost count of the number of girls who were carried (while unconscious) to the medics in need of oxygen. It was almost as if I went to a time warp and was watching a Beatles concert from the early 1960s.

While the sound quality of the show left much to the imagination (arenas are never conducive for music performances), the dynamic between Hoba Hoba Spirit and the crowd made for a truly memorable experience. I am sure there are many factors as to why these young girls are able to identify with Hoba’s music that I, as an American male, will never truly understand. Yet, it was very apparent that, through the music, the band was able to form a special bond with the audience.

After the two-hour set-list was finished, I met up with the band backstage. An hour or so later, we started our exit out of the arena. Quite expectedly, there were throngs of girls waiting for autographs and pictures. It took some time to actually make it out of the venue; and when we finally did, we were greeted by more fans on the streets!

As it was a “ladies only” concert, I felt very awkward taking photographs, so I had a (female) Moroccan friend use my camera. So thank you, Myriam, for helping me out! Also, a huge thanks to everyone in Hoba Hoba Spirit – Adil, Reda, Othmane, Anouar, Saad, and everyone else in their management crew.

Lastly, check out [www.hobahobaspirit.com](http://www.hobahobaspirit.com) when you get a chance. Make sure to brush on your French first, though!

---

### **May 12, 2008**

I cannot believe I forgot to write this in my last entry: after the Hoba Hoba Spirit concert last Saturday, everyone (band and entourage) went out to dinner. The Moroccan Music Awards were taking place that evening, so every few minutes, someone in the band would get a phone call informing them that Hoba had won such-and-such award. In the end, Hoba Hoba Spirit was awarded Best Single of the Year (“Hoba’s Back”), Best Album of the Year (*Trabando*) and Best Band of the Year. So a BIG congratulations to Hoba Hoba Spirit for sweeping the Moroccan Music Awards!

And if that weren’t enough for one day, the *New York Times* name-dropped the band in an article about the upcoming Gnaoua Festival in Essaouria. The Times referred to Hoba Hoba Spirit as a, “crowd-wowing, multi-lingual, ‘Moroc’n roll’” band. Way to go guys!

---

### **May 16, 2008**

On Friday afternoon, I arrived at Hit Radio in Rabat and then was taken to the Villa des Arts to pick up my press pass for the Mawazine Festival. (Oddly enough, on the badge, my name is listed as “Jesse Mahamlan” – not exactly sure as to why). I cannot express how grateful I am that Younes at Hit Radio was able to arrange this for me.

Founded in 2001, the “Mawazine Festival: Rhythms of the World” is held in Rabat during the third week of May. The festival is nine days long across nine different venues. There are over one hundred concerts with artists from forty different countries. The festival lineup is very eclectic: everything from the Moroccan Royal Symphony to the Colombian pop sensation Juanes to jazz legend Al Di Meola to the world-famous Whitney Houston. Needless to say, there is a wonderful mix of Moroccan and international acts.

Thanks to my press pass, I was able to attend the opening ceremony for the festival – it was a “by invitation only” event. Held at the Villa des Arts, an incredible outdoor complex filled with fountains, statues and gardens in central Rabat, the inaugural event was laden with pomp and delicious pastries. The Mariachis Real de Oro, a ten-piece mariachi band from Mexico, played a short set as the invitees arrived at the venue.

After the president of the festival delivered the opening words (in Arabic and French), the Seventh Edition of the Mawazine Festival: Rhythms of the World officially began. The Luisito Quintero Percussion Madness Experience, a group from Venezuela, played the gala.

The band is composed of Luisito, who plays the drum kit and timbales, a bassist, a guitarist, a keyboardist, a synthesizer player and a hand percussionist, who plays five big conga drums. This may come as little surprise but I absolutely love it when the drummer leads the band. After the first few numbers, it was clear that the music was entirely composed around the drumming. Seldom a drummer is the musical director of a group; so, when the drummer is the principal musician, it is a very special experience.

Luisito also provided the vocals for the group; although, most of the songs were purely instrumentals. A left-handed drummer, Luisito plays a five-piece, silver-wrapped Pearl drum kit, with a (very small) 18” bass drum. He also plays the timbales like the late legend Mr. Tito Puente – in fact, they have shared the stage together.

The LQPME mixes rhythms from Venezuela, Brazil, the Caribbean and Cameroon – before each song, the band would state where the beat originates from; of course, it was very helpful to have those clarifications. Fortunately for me, the band interacted with the audience in English. I always enjoy when there is a lot of dialogue between the artist and the audience. I must admit that it was difficult to listen such rhythmic music and not be able to dance!

After eating dinner near Place Ibn Yassine (and by “dinner” I mean pizza), I headed over to the Bouregreg, an outdoor venue sandwiched in between the water and the Oudayas (the old part of the city). The Bouregreg is the most popular stage of the Mawazine Festival. The layout of the venue is very clever: in the front, closest to the stage there is the press and VIP section, then a mid-level pay section, and then the back area is all free. It is a really good system as it is unrealistic to expect all seats to be free. The combination of the breeze from the bay and the backdrop of the Oudayas make it for a very special setting, indeed.

Friday’s performance featured ten-time Grammy winner George Benson. It was an enjoyable concert, especially the instrumental numbers; yet, if you are familiar with Mr. Benson’s catalogue, you will recognize that the plethora of love ballads makes the concert-going experience not exactly ideal for a single man!

Regardless, I had a nice time, and thanks to my press pass, had a great view of the stage. Thanks again Younes and everyone at Hit Radio!

---

### **May 17, 2008**

My single complaint of the Mawazine Festival is that on many nights, there are too many concerts that I wanted to attend – I sheepishly admit that this is a good predicament to be in, though. Furthermore, many of the venues are spread throughout the city; so it can take a half an hour (not including traffic) to get from one venue to another. On Saturday night, for instance, there were three acts at three different venues that I really wanted to check out: Ziggy Marley, Goran Bregovic and Tony Allen.

Despite this dilemma, it should be highlighted that there is a major advantage of having so many venues in so many different locations: this format allows the general public to attend more shows. My friend Amine pointed out that many citizens of Rabat are not able to easily move around the city (due to expensive cab fares and other factors); so, by having venues in each section of the city, theoretically, there is always a stage nearby.

Anyways, on Saturday night, I ended up attending the Goran Bregovic concert at the Bouregreg with several friends, including Amine (who I am staying with) and most of the members of Hoba Hoba Spirit. The concert constituted the strangest live-music experience of my life: Goran Bregovic's music is the epitome of unique.

Born in Sarajevo, Bosnia, Mr. Bregovic plays with a massive, twenty-nine-piece band. Mr. Bregovic sits in the front of the stage, plays the electric guitar and sings. The band consists of a string section, a brass and woodwinds section, a male choir, two female vocalists and a bass drum player. Although Mr. Bregovic employed minimal percussion into his music, there were very strong beats, and often, in odd time signatures, like 7/4.

My initial reaction to the music was that it sounded like Balkan wedding music...but astronomically more expansive. (I later found out that Mr. Bregovic's band is called "The Wedding & Funeral Band"). Because of the sheer size of the band, there are so many layers of music: in the most positive sense, listening to Goran Bregovic is a very overwhelming experience.

After staying for an hour or so, the members of Hoba Hoba Spirit and I decided to check out Tony Allen, who was performing in Hay Ryad – on the opposite side of the city.

Tony Allen, born in Nigeria, is credited for founding Afrobeat music – a mix of jazz, funk and African rhythms. Mr. Allen was the drummer for Fela Kuti, the original pioneer of Afrobeat music.

Saturday evening's band consisted of a bass player, guitarist, saxophonist, trumpets, hand percussionist, and of course, Tony Allen himself. Mr. Allen was playing a modest five-piece, cherry-colored Yamaha kit.

Although Mr. Allen is approaching seventy-years-old, his chops are still in full form. Because of my press pass, I was almost able to get right on the stage: it was incredible to have such a close vantage point. Watching his jelly-like hands was inspiring.

Considering that it was raining, there was a good turn out for the show. I was disappointed that I was unable to stay for all of the Goran Bregovic show, but I would not have forgiven myself if I passed up on seeing the legendary Tony Allen.

Saturday night was a strange mixture of music – Eastern European and Nigerian – yet, that just highlights the diversity of the Mawazine Festival.

---

### **May 18, 2008**

On Sunday night, once again, I was presented with a crucial choice of what concerts to attend – bear in mind that nine different venues have shows going on all at the same time. I boiled my decision down to two stages: either I would head to the Bouregreg to see Los Van Van (a very famous group from Cuba), or check out the smaller Hay Ryad scene to catch performances by groups from Congo and Mali. My good friend Amine recommended that I attend the concerts of the African musicians, as I will experience plenty of Cuban music this summer in Havana.

Just after nine o'clock, Zao, an Afrobeat band from Brazzaville, Congo, took the stage. The band consisted of a bassist, guitarist, keyboardist, trombonist, trumpeter, percussionist, drummer, two female vocalists and the singer (Zao). Within the first thirty seconds of the concert, I knew I would not regret my decision.

The band opened with an extra-funky jam, and then out came Zao, wearing perhaps the greatest hat ever made. I think the best way to describe Zao is that his body is not nearly big enough to fit his persona. Never before have I seen an individual with a stronger stage presence than Zao. By the truest definition of the word, Zao is animated; he has such a vivacious stage presence that he is like a cartoon character– and I say that as a

compliment. There is something magical about his ability to instantaneously connect with the audience through his music.

The dialogue Zao created with the audience was in French, Lingala (Congolese), Arabic, and a little English. Regardless of what language he was speaking, his message was always clear: often he sung about the futile nature of war.

As for the music, it was the ultimate fusion: a handful of West African rhythms, a splash of reggae, a hint of jazz and a whole lot of funk! This mixture created for very complex rhythms. The drummer was absolutely outstanding; definitely the best of the festival to date, and that says a lot considering the night before I say Tony Allen!

The crowd adored Zao: the gratis-section was packed and people were dancing throughout the entire set. This concert was probably the most enjoyable show I have seen all year, and ranks as one of my all-time favorites. Of course, the short videos I will post are an unfair testimony to how great the music was: like most concerts, you simply had to be there to experience the greatness of the performance.

(Side note: I actually just bought one of his records on the iTunes store; and, as expected, it is not as exciting as the live show but is very good. Just make sure to purchase the album, "L'aiguille," as, apparently, there is a heavy metal band also named Zao!)

Towards the end of the show, Zao introduced each of the band members, and in turn, each member soloed. Zao is a very humble band leader, indeed. As Zao's set ended, I began to wonder how could the following act, Super Rail Band de Bamako, top this one? Quite honestly, I knew that it would be a challenging feat.

After a brief intermission, the Super Rail Band de Bamako, from Mali, took the stage. The band leader, who played the djembe, gave some background information on Mali (i.e. on the population and location). It was actually pretty cool that he would make the effort to teach the audience a little about where he comes from and tidbits about his

culture. Granted, Mali is very close to Morocco, so I am sure most of the audience knew a lot of the information; but, nonetheless, it was a thoughtful gesture.

The band consisted of a djembe player, two male vocalists, a lead guitarist, a rhythm guitarist, a bassist, a percussionist (who played congas) and a drummer. Because of the abundance of percussion, the beats were much heavier than that of Zao's music. Interestingly enough, there were a lot of straight rhythms (as in, not broken feels), mostly in 16<sup>th</sup> note feels. (To enrich your drumming nomenclature, a "feel" is a specific rhythm/pattern of a beat).

I actually thoroughly enjoyed the Super Rail Band de Bamako's performance – but, of course, it was no Zao. This has been my favorite night of the Mawazine Festival, without a doubt!

---

### **May 19, 2008**

Around 11am on Monday morning, I arrived at the Hilton Hotel for Al Di Meola's press conference only to find out that it was canceled. That evening, I attended a performance by Al Di Meola, the legendary jazz-fusion guitarist. Fortunately, thanks to my press pass, I was able to spend some time backstage before the beginning of the show. I did (very briefly) meet Mr. Di Meola, but, more interestingly, I was able to have a long chat with Gumbi Ortiz, Al Di Meola's longtime percussionist.

Gumbi (pronounced "Goom-bee") is a really funny and warm individual: although he is a celebrated and internationally famous percussionist, in no way did he give off an air of pretentiousness. After I explained the dynamic of my research fellowship, we had some really compelling conversations about drums and spirituality. As he was talking a mile-a-minute (and we were covering so many different angles of the topic), there is no way I can transcribe everything we discussed.

One of the more interesting parts of our conversation was when we were talking about spirituality in jazz music. Gumbi contended that jazz drumming is, “more revolutionary than evolutionary.” That is to say, unlike other genres of music, such as gospel, jazz does not have any direct connection to “spirituality,” such as to a formalized religious institution.

In terms of my project, he commented how important it is for me to have this exposure to the different genres of music around the world. Gumbi really helped me appreciate the fact that the Mawazine Festival takes place in Africa – the cradle of *all* music. Simply put, it is just really amazing to think of the festival in that context. It was a truly special experience to be able to chat about my journeys this year with one of the finest percussionists in the world.

Gumbi, a Cuban-American born in the South Bronx, recommended that while in Cuba, I make sure to check out the “bata” – a form of drumming that fuses Cuban and Nigerian beats. He also said I couldn’t miss attending a Santeria ceremony; to see how the music is used in the ritual sacrifices. Moving on...

The performance was at the Mohammed V Theatre in central Rabat. It is a standard theatre, red-plush seats and all – nothing extraordinary. More importantly, the acoustics were excellent. Not surprisingly, the show was completely sold out. The audience gave the band a huge reception at the start of the show – Mr. Di Meola commented that it was truly a “heartfelt” gesture.

“Al Di Meola and World Symphony” consists of Mr. Di Meola on acoustic guitar, a second acoustic guitar player from Greece, an accordion player from Italy and Gumbi on hand percussion, playing the darbuka and cajon. The darbuka is a North African hand drum; basically, it is identical to a djembe, with the exception that it is not made out of wood. The cajon is exactly what its name (in Spanish) indicates: it is a wooden box, and is commonly used in flamenco and Cuban music.

Because this was an acoustic show, most of the numbers were rather soothing. That being said, often in the middle of a “lighter” song, Mr. Di Meola would burst out with a light speed riff – remember, he is most famous for being one of the fastest guitar pickers of all time. Surely, Mr. Di Meola has an unprecedented level of technical skill.

Unfortunately for me, overall, there was minimal percussion during the show; nonetheless, there were several times when Gumbi provided a prevalent beat.

For the encore, the group played “Mediterranean Sundance,” one of the tracks off of the 1977 album *Elegant Gypsy*. They performed for just under two hours in total.

---

### **May 20, 2008**

There is something very special about attending a concert at the open-aired Bouregreg scene: just behind the historic Oudayas district, the Bouregreg has a clear view of Sale, the sister city of Rabat, which is located just across the river. Because the venue has a large capacity (about 80% of which is free for the public), there always a good turn out, and thus a positive atmosphere for a concert.

Tuesday night at the Bouregreg featured the salsa superstar, Issac Delgado (yes, that is how you spell his first name). Born in Havana, Cuba, Issac Delgado is best known for his smash hit, “La Vida Es Un Carnaval.”

Like most salsa ensembles, Issac Delgado’s band was rather large, with fourteen members in total; specifically, keyboards, an electric standup bass, two trombones, two trumpets, one baritone saxophone, a synthesizer, two background male singers, congas, bongos and a timbales “kit”.

The percussion section was fabulous: the main drummer played a hybrid drum kit, which included a bass drum, two big timbales, a snare drum, two crash cymbals, a pair of mini hi hats, two metal cowbells and a jam block (a plastic wood block). It was a pretty neat

set up. In addition to that player, there was a hand percussionist who played three large conga drums, and a third percussionist who played the smaller bongo drums and the occasional cowbell.

As a drummer, the rhythms in salsa, timba and mambo music are always extraordinary. For a clarification, timba is a form of salsa that originates from Cuba – it is very similar to salsa, but is distinct. Mambo also is similar to salsa; yet, interestingly enough, mambo music is directly derived from West African music used in religious ceremonies. In fact, the word “mambo” can be translated as, “conversation with God”.

What is so enjoyable about salsa music is that each song tells a story: the composition of the music follows the flow of the story, thus allowing each piece to be distinct. While Cuban Spanish can be somewhat difficult, due to the plethora of slang and dropped syllables, for the most part, I was able to understand the lyrics, or at least the general message of each song.

The crowd was really into the music: countless people were dancing, and there were even three sets of dancers on the stage, at various points in the concert. Issac Delgado often engaged the crowd, trying to get everyone to clap to the beat: I must admit that is always amusing to see an audience try to clap a salsa beat!

Start to finish, the show was outstanding: I am extremely eager to spend time in Cuba and listen to salsa, timba and mambo in a localized context.

After the show ended, I took a taxi to the Hay Ryad venue to catch the end of the set of the Schäl Sick Brass Band. Formed in Cologne, Germany, the band consists of a female vocalist, a trombonist, a trumpeter, a clarinetist, a tuba player, electric guitarist, drummer and djembe/hand drum player.

To be completely honest, I find it difficult to fully enjoy a concert when I show up two-thirds into the set; yet, the band had such an interesting, full sound, it was easy to get right into the music.

Compared to the other performances I have seen so far at the Mawazine Festival, the Schäl Sick Brass Band had a much “harder” sound. Although they are a “brass band,” there is a serious rock influence to their music. Nonetheless, oddly enough, there are strong overtones of Turkish music. So, in sum, they sound like a rock, brass, Turkish band...a strange combination, but it actually sounded great!

It was unusual that there was not a bass player, but the tuba player filled in that piece of the rhythm section, creating a unique ensemble. Both the drummer and percussionist were outstanding, as well. Moreover, at least in the songs I saw, it seemed that there was a drum solo or two (or three!) in each song. Of course, for me, I couldn't ask for much more.

I wish I was able to have seen the Schäl Sick Brass Band concert in its totality; but I am happy that I stayed for the full Issac Delgado show. Once again, this evening was an enjoyable contrast of genres of music.

---

### **May 21, 2008**

On Wednesday evening, I headed to the Hay Ryad venue – I am staying just a few minutes walk from the stage, so it is unbelievably convenient. Freshly Ground, a South African group composed of a female lead vocalist, a female violinist and keyboardist, a male flute and saxophonist, a male bassist, a male guitarist and a male drummer.

The music was a fluid mix of reggae and lighter rock; on the songs that employed the violin, there was almost a “country” feel to it. (Perhaps if you are familiar with Willie Nelson's reggae album *Countryman*, the concept of “country-reggae” may not be so abstract).

The highlight of the show was a cover of Bob Marley's "Zimbabwe," a classic song about the struggle for equality in the troubled nation. (It is quite depressing to think that Marley wrote the song in 1979 to draw attention to the political strife in Zimbabwe; and today, the Robert Mugabe regime still maintains control of the country, despite his recent defeat in a democratic vote for the presidency).

The second act of the evening was Omar Pene, a smooth vocalist from Senegal. Having recorded over thirty records, Omar Pene is more of an institution than musician in terms of Senegalese music.

The band is composed of Omar Pene on vocals, two female background vocalists, a bassist, an electric guitarist, a keyboardist, a synth player, a kora player (a 21-stringed harp-like lute), a percussionist (playing three different types of djembes) and a drummer (on a regular Western kit).

I had never seen a kora before; I feel so lucky to have the privilege to be exposed to so much new music (and, thus instruments, even if they are not in the percussion family). Because of the tremendous diversity of music at the Mawazine festival, I have been introduced to several new styles of music, which always makes for an enriching experience.

As for the music of Omar Pene, the first half of the show was rather mellow, but the second half really picked up.

The percussionist was superb: on one of his djembes, there was a metal shaker, exactly like an Ainu djembe player I saw perform in Kyoto, Japan. As the music began to be more upbeat, the percussionist used a drum stick on his hand drums to augment the power of the sound made from each drum. Sometimes it is difficult to coordinate multiple rhythms in a performance; yet, the percussionist and drummer played together seamlessly, often trading triplet-filled fills back and forth.

What was most impressive about the performance was the devotion of the audience: the VIP area in front of stage (reserved for press and other artists) was absolutely packed. In fact, proportionally, there were more people in the VIP section than general admission section: it is always a positive testimony to the credibility of the artist on stage when the crowd is filled with other musicians.

At the end of the show, I ran into Saad, of Hoba Hoba Spirit – H2S performs tomorrow night at the Qamra scene and I am really looking forward to it!

---

**May 22, 2008**

Over the past two months, I have been very fortunate to make many wonderful contacts throughout the Moroccan music scene. Although the original parameters of the proposal for my fellowship indicate that my research pertains to drumming and drum crafting in different religious and spiritual traditions, while in Morocco, the focus of my research has expanded to include a more contemporary dynamic. The overlying question remains, as to whether “spirituality” exists in modern music. In short, I believe that, to a certain degree, “spirituality” exists in all genres of music, traditional and contemporary, as music is an expression of the heart.

As I have reported earlier, much of my time in Morocco has been spent in Casablanca, living with Adil Hanine, the drummer of Hoba Hoba Spirit. Indeed, Adil’s connection to the music scene here has been an indispensable asset for my research; but more importantly, we have become such close friends that it is like we are family – something that obviously transcends anything pertinent to my research.

I have been well aware that Hoba Hoba Spirit is very successful; yet, until Thursday night’s performance, my conception of just how popular Hoba is was completely redefined. During the sound check in the late afternoon, I was talking to Hisham, the band’s manager, about the show. Probably about one hundred fifty fans or so arrived

around 4pm, even though the show wasn't going to start until 9pm, so I was curious as to how many people would come to the show. When I asked how many people were anticipated to attending the concert, he asserted that "50,000" were expected. While the venue was more than suitable to house that many people, I was pretty skeptical that that many people would turn out for the show – the only other time I saw Hoba Hoba Spirit perform there was a crowd of about 2,500 people (the "girls only" show), a very good sized crowd, but nowhere near 50,000. Furthermore, there are only a handful of musical acts that can draw such a large crowd. So, I figured that I had misheard Hisham, and that he said, "15,000," a seemingly more reasonable number, although still very impressive.

After the sound check was finished, the members of the band and I went to Hisham's apartment to kill some time until the show. Some of the guys seemed particularly nervous about the anticipation of playing a big show – an absolutely reasonable feeling. The band was performing at the Qamra scene, a huge outdoor stage near the Rabat bus station – in fact, Qamra is the largest stage at the Mawazine Festival.

Around 8:30 p.m., we returned to the venue, it was absolutely packed with people – it turned out that Hisham's prediction was wrong, after all. By just after 9 o'clock when the band took stage, 70,000 (!!!) people were in attendance. (The organizers of the festival confirmed that this is an accurate statistic). Granted, this was a free performance; nonetheless, that does not undermine the amazing feat of drawing a crowd of that many people.

I was entirely overwhelmed by the size of the crowd: being surrounded by that many people is an indescribable sensation. There were people as far as you could see; the crowd even spilled out onto the streets! Fortunately for me, I was right up next to the stage, thanks to my pass, so I was not lost in the sea of people.

What was most impressive about the (astronomical) size of the crowd was that almost everyone knew all the lyrics to almost all of the songs. That is to say, it was not just 70,000 people that showed up to see a free concert; it was 70,000 devout Hoba fans! I

cannot imagine, as a musician, entertaining that many people; it must be an incredible feeling to make so many people so happy.

Of course, I will readily admit that, as I have developed lasting friendships with members of the band, I am a bit biased; regardless, Hoba Hoba Spirit's performance was one of the single best concerts I have ever attended. There was so much energy – both on stage and throughout the crowd - that made for such a memorable experience, a true highlight of my year on the Bristol Fellowship. It is actually pretty funny how energetic the band was, considering how languid most of the guys were before the show. (The one exception was Adil, who was so hyped up before the show that he kept on telling me, “We’re going to burn Rabat down!”)

In terms of the band's performance, they were outstanding, to say the least. Of course, I had seen Hoba play in Casablanca before; yet, this performance was head-and-shoulders better than that show. Everyone just clicked and played their best; and thus, the band sounded incredible. (Side note: all of the shows at the Mawazine Festival have had excellent sound quality, a testament to the professionalism of the festival's organizers and engineers).

For just under two hours, Hoba Hoba Spirit played almost nonstop. The band had such fluid set list: there were minimal breaks, as almost every song bridged straight into the ensuing one. There was a concrete cohesion with the set list: the band opened with their hit, “Radio Hoba,” and did a reprise of the song for the encore.

Like any live show, it is very difficult to describe the sound of the show: to be as concise as possible, the show was very rock, very reggae, very punk, very gnaoua, and very, very cool.

Musically, the band has such a unique sound: because they are able to employ the sounds of so many different genres, all their songs sound very distinct. To give the band another level of expansiveness, everyone but Saad (the bassist), provides vocals. Surely, Reda,

the lead guitarist, would be considered the lead singer as well; yet, the other guys do sing quite often. Furthermore, all of the members that contribute vocals sound very different from one another; so that expands the musical range of the band. Lastly, because so many of the members are capable of singing, the vocal harmonies are always superb.

There were so many great numbers that it is impossible to pick a single favorite; but, I think one of the highlights of the evening was, “Marock’n Roll,” a song led by Reda. Perhaps this was one of the most memorable songs as it is sung in English; but, it is such a catchy number, especially as Reda plays harmonica on it. Further, Adil’s smooth drum beat perfects the song.

By the end of the show, it seemed that everyone in the crowd was covered with sweat and dust: because most of the venue was just a dirt ground and almost everyone was dancing, dust caked the entire Qamra scene.

After meeting up with the band backstage to congratulate them on such an incredible performance, we all eventually departed for the Chellah, a site of Phoenician and Roman ruins that have been converted to a royal palace and garden. There was a banquet (in other words, a feast) for the band, as provided by the organizers of the Mawazine Festival. The high life, indeed...

I spoke to Adil earlier today, and learned that on Saturday, the band was given a gift from the King of Morocco, Mohammed VI, in recognition for their performance at the Mawazine Festival. Congratulations to everyone in the band for that award!

---

### **May 23, 2008**

On Friday night, I went to Juanes, the Colombian pop-sensation, concert at the Bouregreg. While I have no interest in pop-rock as a genre, I must admit that I was impressed by performance of the band and Juanes himself – I did not realize that he was such a polished guitarist. Often, music critics overlook the fact that MTV-type,

commercial musicians are some of the most proficiently trained musicians in the world: each member of Juanes' band was very talented. The crowd adored Juanes; and it was an enjoyable concert, for sure.

Although the Mawazine Festival ended on Saturday, I opted not to attend the final, headline show of Whitney Houston – Juanes was enough pop music for me.

The organization of the Mawazine Festival was outstanding: everything from the lineup itself to the light shows to the sound quality was stellar. It is fantastic that the King of Morocco and government are supporting arts and culture in this manner: I recently read that, across all nine venues, approximately 120,000 people attended the festival each day.

I also read that the organizers had a budget between 22 and 24 million dirhams (about \$3.1 million dollars). While that, of course, is a lot of money, considering the fact that there were nine days of music with nine different stages, it is very impressive that they were able to stretch the budget to be able to bring in so many accomplished musicians. On that note, as I have written before, the line up was fantastic, as there was such a comprehensive list of artists that performed. Because of the diverse lineup, I was exposed to so many new artists – the ultimate purpose of any concert-going experience.

Without a doubt, the absolute highlight of the week was the concert of Hoba Hoba Spirit, although, Zao of Congo, was the best individual performer of the festival, in my book.

I cannot express my appreciation to everyone at Hit Radio, and most specifically Younes Boumehdi, for their assistance in helping me cover the festival. What a week!

---

### **May 30 – June 1, 2008**

Last weekend, I attended the Tanjazz Festival in Tangier (often spelled Tanger or Tangiers). As I did not partake in the full festival – it had begun on Wednesday and I

arrived on Friday – I am not asserting the Tanjazz was a complete bust; but, from my experience, it simply was pretty mediocre.

Indeed, Tangier is a wonderful town for a festival: it is a beautiful setting for anything, for that matter. Located on the northern most of Morocco, the narrow Gibraltar Strait is the only thing that separates Tangier from Spain. Because of the proximity to Europe, the audience at Tanjazz is very “jet-setter,” if you will – a very business-like crowd at times.

Strictly in terms of the music, it was a somewhat disappointing experience. I had heard so much about Tanjazz – particularly the late night jam sessions – that I had very high expectations for the quality of music at the festival.

The “jam session” on Friday night at the Palais de Institutions Italiennes featured some rather uninspiring musicians. Perhaps I am bitter, as this “jazz jam session” did not even feature a live rhythm section: no drums or bass, just a keyboardist to fill those roles! An obvious absence of the spirit of jazz music...

But not all was lost as the music on Saturday was terrific, even if the organization of the program was not. Just after eight o’clock on Saturday night, I arrived at the Scene Veolia for a performance by Mokhat Samba, a Moroccan-Senegalese drummer. Unfortunately, due to a last-minute scheduling change, the music started about 75 minutes late: even though this was a free concert, the crowd, rightfully so, was not too pleased with the disorganization of the festival organizers.

When Mokhat Samba finally did take the stage, everyone quickly forgot about the long wait and got right into the music. As I have written so many times before, I find nothing more enjoyable than watching a “drummer’s band.” It was all too evident that Mokhat was the principal song composer: his drum kit stood at the front and center of the stage. During each number, he provided the band with much more than just the backbeat.

In terms of raw talent, Mokhat Samba has to be one of the better drummers I have seen all year: some people were just born to play drums and he definitely falls into that category.

Sadly, because the show started so late, I was unable to stay to see it in its entirety, as I had tickets to another performance, an eight-piece jazz band from Belgium, called Jazz Me Do.

As you can deduce from their name, Jazz Me Do reinterprets songs originally written by The Beatles. While the idea behind Jazz Me Do is quite kitschy, their execution was most excellent. The compositions of each song were entirely re-arranged, while still staying true to the original version. Focusing on the early numbers from The Beatles catalogue, Jazz Me Do played a fluid and enjoyable set. The jazzification (okay, that's not a word) of classics like, "Eleanor Rigby," "Drive My Car," and "Can't Buy Me Love," was an interesting new take on those timeless Lennon/McCartney songs. The most memorable number was, "Girl" – the band did a very clever reinterpretation of this John Lennon track from the *Rubber Soul* record. I don't doubt that the Fab Four themselves would approve of this musical venture.

The jam session on Saturday night was pretty good: it certainly was better than the night before, as there was a live rhythm section this time!

After the Mawazine Festival, almost any music festival feels rather weak in comparison – I will readily admit my immediate partiality. I definitely enjoyed my time in Tangier; but, truth be told, it was not one of the better music events I have seen here in Morocco. I have no regrets about going, and would even recommend attending the Tanjazz Festival in the future, if only as an excuse to see the town of Tangier.

---

**June 6, 2008**

When I arrived in Morocco in mid-March, I had every intention of departing by early May. After learning about the plethora of music festivals in May and June in this country, I reasoned that I had to stay in Morocco until the end of June. One festival in particular, the Fes Festival of World Sacred Music, correlated with my research so visibly that I knew I could not leave Morocco without attending it.

The fourteenth edition of the Fes Festival of World Sacred Music began on June 6<sup>th</sup> and ended on the 15<sup>th</sup>. The theme of this year's festival was "Paths To Creation" – according to the general director of the festival, Fatima Sadiqi, the theme, "highlights the contribution of innovation across the quest for the sacred, knowledge and inspiration." 2008 is a very special year for Fes, as it marks the 1200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the city. Fes, a former imperial city, has a very rich musical history; and the festival reflects the various musical traditions of this ancient city that have spanned many generations.

During the course of this week, I have refrained from instant journalism – immediate coverage of the Fes Festival – as I have needed time to collect my thoughts and accurately analyze the entirety of the festival.

Before I detail my various musical experiences at the Fes Festival, I feel obliged to give my unbridled opinion of the central tenets of the festival. With my criticism of the festival, and, praise for it, I do have several suggestions that I will outline in a forthcoming post of my "final thoughts" about the Fes Festival of World Sacred Music.

In terms of the general organization, choice of venues and talent of the musicians, in short, the Fes Festival was outstanding. There was a wonderful mix of musicians from all over the world, including, but not limited to, Pakistan, Lebanon, Iraq, Mali, Indonesia, India, Saudi Arabia, Senegal, and of course, Morocco.

Without a doubt, from the very beginning there was an impressive level of professionalism. The festival organizers made many minor, but notably positive, gestures

– such as having space at a Royal Mirage Hotel for the press to work and preparing a detailed program book in three different languages – all of which made covering the festival a very enjoyable, easy experience.

This professionalism extended to the performances themselves: each show was punctual, had good sound quality, and was well staffed. The organizers of the festival took full advantage of the history of the city: most of the venues were in the old city, actually inside of the ancient medina of Fes. Some of the scenes, particularly Bab El Makina and Dar Tazi, are some of the most beautiful locations I have ever seen for a music performance.

Although the Mawazine Festival had more venues (nine compared to four), it seemed as if there were more daily events at the Fes Festival. Unlike the Mawazine, the Fes Festival had workshops, academic seminars, activities for children, and art exhibitions all throughout the day - not to mention the constant flow of traditional and contemporary music. There was an overwhelming amount of options on any given day at the Fes Festival – the good kind of “overwhelming,” that is.

Despite all of these positive assessments, there is something about the general concept of the festival itself that is troubling. I have many reservations about the festival, not only in respect to how different forms of “sacred” music are presented to the audience, but also in respect to the fundamental ideology of the festival itself.

There were two overlying aspects of the festival that were most disconcerting: the surprising presence of materialism, and the overbearing sense of Orientalism. Surely, a festival that promotes “sacred” music should have no part of either of those –isms.

How “sacred” can a “Festival of World Sacred Music” be when the week pass costs almost \$500? The tremendous cost of the festival tickets breeds an equally tremendous degree of inaccessibility: the average Moroccan earns less than a \$10 per day, making the festival financially out of reach for the vast majority of the population. When did “sacred

music” become an elitist endeavor? While there were several free concerts every day, the majority of these shows were of contemporary artists, and not the headlining “sacred” musicians. (Please note that I had a press pass, and did not have to pay to attend the festival).

At times, the festival seemed to promote materialism as much as sacred music. The festival was saturated with shameless corporatism: “A personal, spiritual connection with God, through music...brought to you by Royal Air Maroc, BMCE Bank and Meditel Communications.” There were thirty-four official “partners” and “sponsors” in all. (It must be noted that one patron in particular, the King of Morocco, Mohammed VI, deserves to be separated from the corporate sponsors. Once again, it is wonderful and truly commendable that the King has made such a genuine, and generous, effort to support the music scene in Morocco).

I fully recognize that producing a festival of this magnitude costs millions of dollars, and simply put, corporate sponsorship is mandatory to finance a festival. But, maybe, just maybe, it is rather sacrilegious to unite “sacred music” with such an abundance of corporate enterprises.

The Bab El Makina scene, the festival’s main venue, was littered with tents of the festival sponsors and various business ventures. Century 21, the largest real estate company in the world, even had a tent. Think about that for a moment: among the ticket-holders, there is so much wealth that someone might go to a concert and end up buying a house in Morocco. With such rampant capitalism, how can any sense of piety still exist?

In the most basic sense, sacred music seeks to create a spiritual connection with the Divine. Religious (sacred) music often is performed in the confines of a holy institution, like a church or temple, to eliminate worldly distractions. In the moments of a sacred music performance, is the stage not the temple? It is a doctrine of all religions to disavow any sort of commerce within the physical space of the institution? (Yes, yes, I have been to plenty of Hindu temples that sell souvenirs, and the Vatican does have a gift shop).

Surely John 2:16 is not just a Christian prospect – materialism has no place inside of a mosque or synagogue or any sort of holy sanctuary, for that matter. How can proper devotion to the Divine be made when a vendor is hawking Hagaan Daz a hundred feet from the stage? At what point do we distinguish between reverence and exploitation?

It is sadly ironic because the respective ideological roots of all of these different forms of “sacred” music are the antithesis of the materialism found at the Fes Festival.

Another reservation for me is the immense sense of Orientalism that surrounds the festival. The concept of Orientalism, as written about by the celebrated scholar Edward Said, essentially states that in the West, we have a very skewed view of the Eastern cultures. Strictly in terms of “religious studies,” some Westerners perceive Eastern religions as more “mystical” than Western traditions, and thus they are “better.” (You see this practice quite frequently in India, Westerners who “adopt” Hinduism because of the esoteric essence of this Eastern religion).

In a certain sense, the general idea of a festival dedicated to “World Sacred Music” is the definition of Orientalism: a bunch of extremely wealthy Westerners gather together to find the “spiritual” element in different forms of religious music. Since when did the bourgeoisie become so pious?

Sacred music is an exclusive union between the performer and God: through the hypnotic music, the musician transcends our immediate reality and is able to connect with God. While observers are able to comprehend the mystical experience that the musician is undergoing, it would be preposterous to assume that the audience has the same metaphysical experience as the performer.

Irrefutably, it is possible for more than one individual, as in a group of performers, to have a simultaneous, occult experience. To clarify: for example, in Gnaoua, during public celebrations, it is common for participants, who are not musicians, to fall into a state of trance. Listening to the rhythms of the music can create a transcendental experience. But

there is a difference between a dancing group of devoted observers, and a seated, suit-and-tie audience.

The most elementary reason why the Fes Festival of World Sacred Music must be labeled as an Orientalist endeavor is that the audience is not encouraged to partake in the music, but simply to observe it, through an academic lens.

I assert that there is nothing wrong with that concept – to study a foreign, religious practice but not adhere to it. On the most basic level, the ticket-holders at the Fes Festival could be applauded for having such a tolerant, global outlook. In the world of today, one that is growing smaller and smaller each day, yet alarmingly more xenophobic and isolationist, it is essential to have certain individuals who seek to bridge the cultural barriers between the East and the West. For this reason alone, I do support the Fes Festival.

Yet, there is a very thin line between attending a "sacred" music performance because of genuine, academic interest, and attending the performance for reasons because it is "chic." Seldom did everyone in the audience stay for the full show: a very disrespectful act, indeed. Would you walk out of church, synagogue, temple, or mosque while the religious service is still going on? Or, for that matter, a Bruce Springsteen concert before it ended?

I readily admit that many individuals that attend the festival do not deserve to be grouped as "jet-setter" types. While I know it is unfair to label all of the attendees as one, I merely am reflecting my observations from a week of attending performances at the festival.

Clearly, I have very strong feelings about the essence of the Fes Festival of World Sacred Music. As you will read in future posts about my experiences at the performances, I genuinely enjoyed the festival – despite my many, many reservations about it. Take what I wrote with a grain of salt: as the artist Man Ray once said, "All critics should be assassinated."

---

**June 10, 2008**

On Tuesday evening, I headed to Bab El Makina, the main venue for the Fes Festival, to check out a performance by Panti Pusaka Budaya, a theatre troupe from Bali. The group mixes theatre, dance and music to re-create traditional stories of Hindu folklore, specifically that of Lord Shiva, and his manifestation as Nataraja, the Hindu god of dance.

Gamelan, the musical accompaniment, is an orchestra of percussion instruments, chiefly gongs, cymbals, hand drums, xylophones and metallophones. This arrangement of instruments is not exclusive to percussion, as flutes, strings, and vocals are also employed in the music. Gamelan is unique to Indonesia, and actually pre-dates the arrival of Hinduism and Buddhism to the archipelago.

Before the show began, the artists burned incense on the stage, making the performance feel like a genuine Hindu ceremony. Just as the artists took the stage, the call to prayer began from a near by mosque: it was a very cool contrast of Muslim and Hindu acts of devotion.

There were six musicians in all, and four dancers – only one male, but he was the leader of the troupe. Within Balinese Hinduism, music and dance go hand-in-hand; although, not surprisingly, I was much more interested in the musical aspect of the performance.

The orchestra consisted of two metallophone players, one gong player, one cymbal player, one percussionist, and a flutist. For several songs, additional, extra-large, flutes (or, some sort of woodwind instrument) were brought out.

The percussionist often played his drum with a stick in his right hand, and just with his palm on the left side of the drum. The drum was very similar to a South Indian dholak, although it was a bit larger. I am sure there is a direct lineage between this drum and the

dholak, as it is only logical to conclude that the musical instruments of India arrived in Bali in tandem with the emergence of Hinduism.

The metallophones were the most interesting aspect of the performance: each instrument was laden with a series of beautiful carvings and paintings in red, black and gold. The craftsmanship truly was outstanding – not to mention the sound of the instruments was exceptional. The metallophone is played with a hammer; the hammer strikes a metal bar, and then the musician quickly grabs the metal bar to control the reverberations, to augment or lessen the sound. These metallophones are specifically called “gangsa” – a metallophone specific to Indonesia. (Metallophones are found all around the world; the most common example of one is the glockenspiel).

Most impressively, the two metallophone players always stayed in sync with one another: it was absolutely amazing to watch the mutual coordination, considering the complexity (and speed) of the scales they were playing. The rapid, staccato movement across the metal bars simply was fascinating to witness. The music had a scurrying feel to it that fit seamlessly to the accompanying dance sequences.

Because the performance included both music and dance, each song was very long. While I, admittedly, did not pay much attention to the dancing, it was enjoyable to watch the dancers move to the rhythm of the music. Furthermore, the costumes of the dancers, specifically the masks, were all quite stunning in terms of the intricacy of the detail. The dancers frequently changed their masks, as each mask represented a different deity or religious figure – each time the dancer removed a mask, a short prayer was made.

The backdrop of the gate of the Bab El Makina was incredible; a truly perfect setting for traditional music. I was thrilled to be able to see a Balinese gamelan performance, as I had selected Bali as my first destination for my fellowship, because of the large Hindu diaspora there. For various reasons (well only one actually, that the U.S. State Department had listed Bali as unsafe for travel, due to a series of recent bombings), I had to alter my itinerary, and replaced Bali with Fiji. I have no regrets!

---

**June 11, 2008**

One of the true highlights of the Fes Festival of World Sacred Music was on Wednesday evening, at the Bab El Makina scene. Hadhra, a group of twenty musicians from Morocco, Tunisia and Iraq, performed a fantastic set: their two-a-half-hour musical journey was filled with energy and excitement.

Formed in Tunisia, Hadhra draws upon traditional Sufi poetry to create a grand musical, and mystical experience. While it is not entirely accurate to label Hadhra as traditional Sufi music, as there are obvious Western instrumental influences, the presence of Sufism is more than evident in their performance.

The evening began with two musicians on stage: one (blind) guitarist and another string player. The two musicians played a melodically relaxing prelude for about ten minutes or so. Then, a third musician, a keyboardist, joined them, for an additional five minutes. As I was waiting anxiously for a progression in the music, from out of nowhere, about twenty other musicians, and more than a half dozen dancers, took the stage – all dressed in matching outfits.

The music was vocally driven for the most part, led by a male and female vocalist; however, there were hand drums, a violin, a saxophone, an accordion, and keyboards. Depending on the song, there were a number of drummers, ranging from none to six. Many of the songs began just with the hand drums, and then slowly added the other instruments and vocals. The importance of percussion was accentuated by the fact that there was one man on stage whose job was to change, and tune, the drums. I thoroughly enjoyed the several songs that had nice, succinct drum breaks.

In the early songs of the set, the music was not heavy on the rhythms; something expected with the Sufi music, as the lyrics profess a personal connection between the

performer and God. The vocal ranges of some of the singers blew me away: the combination of such strong vocals, and such a large band, made for a huge sound.

As the performance progressed, more intricate rhythms were employed. The movement of the music was so smooth; from start to finish, there was a perfectly fluid evolution of the set.

The light show was extraordinary tonight; and once again, the venue of Bab El Makina provided the perfect atmosphere for a “sacred music” concert – sans, the flood of corporate tents near the entrance, that is.

I love having the freedom of mobility that comes with a press pass: to experience the same performance from different vantage points makes for an even more enjoyable concert experience.

There was a very large turnout tonight; perhaps this was in direct correlation with the delicious, free food that was available before the show...

I am sure that the music would have meant even more to me if I had been able to understand the lyrics. Regardless, it was a wonderful evening, and perhaps my favorite “sacred” music performance of the festival.

But the night was not over. After the evening at Bab El Makina ended, the night at the Dar Tazi scene just began. Dar Tazi is the late night venue for the Fes Festival: only traditional Sufi musicians perform at this stage. (Hadhra, for example, would be deemed as not traditional enough to perform at Dar Tazi).

The Dar Tazi scene is tucked away in the medina, right in the heart of Fes. It is a rather small space: the stage is not so much a stage, as a mildly elevated platform. Unlike Bab El Makina, there is a space for the general public. The catch, of course, is that this space is very limited; so, the security guards arbitrarily decide who is able to attend the

performance. Despite this flawed system of admission, the public space always is packed to capacity. The seating is a little odd, as everyone is required to sit on the carpeted ground.

Tonight's performance was entitled, "Tartit Women's Ensemble: Popular and Sacred Chants of Tuaregs." The nine musicians – all but one was female – were from Mali.

The music had a very tribal feel to it; after all, it was the music of nomadic people. Many of the songs had a slow tempo: while the music was vocally driven, there still was a modest influence of percussion-based rhythms. At certain times during the show, members of the band performed traditional Saharan dances.

Dar Tazi has a very strong "community" feel to it; it is an open-aired, natural setting, with trees and a fair amount of greenery. The crowd was very mellow, and it is clear that most of the audience were locals from the medina.

All in all, the contrast of the show at Bab El Makina and Dar Tazi made for a great day of music.

---

### **June 12, 2008**

Tonight, the legendary Abdelwahab Doukkali performed at the Bab El Makina. Abdelwahab Doukkali is one of the most successful Moroccan musicians of all time; to give his level of popularity some perspective, the following night at the Bab Boujloud scene, there was a tribute band that just played Abdelwahab Doukkali compositions. A. Doukkali is more than a musician; he is an institution.

This evening's performance was entitled, "Spiritual Dialogue Between Souls." The orchestra of Rachid Regragui, a very young but already-celebrated conductor, accompanied A. Doukkali. Typically, A. Doukkali plays contemporary music; nonetheless, tonight, he only performed traditional, religious music.

Princess Lalla Salma was in attendance; and, naturally, the audience gave her a huge ovation. (Side note: in the Moroccan royal family, the woman married to the King is not given the title “Queen,” but instead, “Princess”).

Throughout the entire evening, the performance almost felt as if it were exclusively for the Princess: that is to say, it felt as if the audience was watching in on a private music session of the royal court. All of the musicians wore tuxedos, with the sole exception of A. Doukkali who wore traditional Moroccan garb. Needless to say, it was a majestic production.

Born in Fes, A. Doukkali sings and plays the lute. Although all of the vocals are in Arabic, it is clear that the lyrics of each song reflect typical themes of the music of Sufism: the individual’s quest for a union with God.

Accompanying A. Doukkali was an orchestra of forty musicians, giving the ensemble a very full sound. Truth be told, the music was more melodic than rhythmic: there were only two percussionists. Because A. Doukkali is so popular, the audience was very engaged, often clapping the beat.

After almost three hours of music, the performance at Bab El Makina ended, and I headed over to the Dar Tazi scene. As with every other night at Dar Tazi, this evening’s performance showcased traditional Sufi musicians. Tonight featured the Derkaouiya Brotherhood, conducted by Abdelhamid Zouya. From Larache in North Morocco, the group consists of fourteen musicians. Despite its name, the group is not an exclusively male: there are two female performers. Because of the Derkaouiya Brotherhood is from the north of Morocco, there was a definite Andalusian influence: the group had two lute players and two violists.

As always, the venue was full to capacity. Once again, the audience was obliged to sit, rather than have the freedom to dance. It does seem a little odd that dancing is

discouraged; and I sincerely have no idea why the rules are what they are. Regardless, the performance at Dar Tazi was a great ending to an even better evening.

---

### **June 14, 2008**

The Fes Festival of Sacred Music is not exclusive to “sacred” music: several venues, chiefly Ait Skato and Bab Boujloud, feature contemporary musicians. While I support the idea that the Fes Festival has both traditional and contemporary music, I firmly believe the organizers need to try to bridge the gap between these two genres. That is to say, there is no effort to recognize the “spiritual” aspect of contemporary music. Indeed, it is disappointing that the event organizers place so much emphasis on the “sacredness” of traditional music, yet fail to distinguish or define the “spiritual” essence of modern music.

When discussing this issue with Adil Hanine, the drummer of Hoba Hoba Spirit, he asked me, “What is spiritual music?” After a quick pause, he answered his own question: “Spiritual music is the heart’s expression.”

Regardless of this debate (although, as it is impossible to contradict Adil’s answer, there is not much of a debate at all), the festival organizers did a good job to showcase popular Moroccan artists, such as Nass El Ghiwane, Fnaire, Fes City Clan and Hoba Hoba Spirit.

Hoba Hoba Spirit actually played twice at the festival: on Saturday, June 14<sup>th</sup>, at Ait Skato, a venue outside the city center, and the following Sunday at Bab Boujloud, located in a plaza in the old medina. Both shows were well-attended: there were between twelve and fifteen thousand people in attendance for Saturday night’s show at Ait Skato, and about ten thousand showed up for Sunday afternoon’s performance.

As always, Hoba put on an outstanding show: they are one of the top live performers I have ever seen. At each Hoba concert I have attended, the band has formed a strong, immediate connection with the audience. Because these concerts represent a major form

of social outlet for many young Moroccans, there is always so much energy in the audience, which, in turn, transfers onto the stage.

---

### **June 15, 2008**

Truth be told, I had rather mixed feelings about the Fes Festival of World Sacred Music: on one hand, it is a fantastic gathering of musicians, but on the other, it is a blatant exploitation of religious music. While the festival has a strong emphasis on multiculturalism, which is a positive aspect, there is a rampant sense of materialism at the festival – a prospect that is contrary to sacred music.

Indeed, a lingering question remains, as to whether “spirituality” in music can exist when there is corporate sponsorship. How can it truly be spiritual if a profit is made? Spiritual music is supposed to be free of material chains; the music of the Divine should be accessible to all. Furthermore, music is an expression of the self; so in a sense, almost all music can be labeled as “spiritual,” as, existentially speaking, the self is a reflection of the Self.

Yet, this is all a matter of perspective; some people do not find anything negative about the festival’s approach to “spiritual,” or “sacred,” music. At one show, I met a young banker named Khalid Ben Hadine, who is from Fes. Khalid had very positive things to say about idea of the festival: “Spiritual music is more important [than contemporary music]...it helps you to be comfortable with yourself.”

Khalid asserted that with, “rock and hip hop, we lose spirituality. They are too commercial.” He lamented that the youth of Morocco just “want the clothes” that the artists wear. According to Khalid, “modernization” has caused this desire for the material world. Nevertheless, with the music at the Fes Festival, the people are able to learn about “the history of my country.” The festival creates a “good chance [opportunity] to meet old cultures” from around the world. Khalid was adamant when he stated, “We need it

[sacred music]. Radio is just pop, house, rap; it is so rare to find spiritual music on the radio.”

In sum, the Fes Festival of World Sacred Music is extremely well-organized festival; yet, unfortunately, due to the high cost of the tickets, it remains inaccessible to the bulk of the Moroccan population.

---

### **June 21, 2008**

Today I attended the inaugural year of the Hit Parade Festival, which is sponsored by Hit Radio, in Rabat. Top to bottom, it was the best one-day lineup of any festival I attended in Morocco; some of the artists included H-Kayne, Fnaire, Darga, Bigg, Casa Crew, and Hoba Hoba Spirit

There was a somber atmosphere because a week earlier, the DJ of the hip hop act Fnaire, Hicham Belqas, died in a car accident in Fes. I actually went to Fnaire’s performance in Fes the night before Hicham died. At one point during the festival, all of the artists gathered on a stage for a moment of silence in remembrance of Hicham.

Hoba Hoba Spirit headlined the festival; because there were so many other acts, Hoba didn’t finish their set until almost two in the morning. Of course, Hoba played a great show; but the highlight of the evening was the performance by Darga, another rock-reggae-Gnaoua fusion band from Casablanca. Amine Belghiti, the lead singer of Darga, actually performed a couple of songs with Hoba. A very cool collaboration indeed...

---

### **June 18-22, 2008**

Over the past few years, L’Boulevard Festival in Casablanca has emerged as one of the premier festivals to showcase popular Moroccan rock, reggae and hip hop acts. Like so many other festivals throughout Morocco, the festival was extremely well organized and the promoters demonstrated a profound level of professionalism.

The festival ran from Wednesday, June 18<sup>th</sup> through Sunday, the 22<sup>nd</sup>. I was only able to attend two nights, Thursday and Sunday, as I wanted to attend the Maroc Hit Parade in Rabat on the 21<sup>st</sup>. (This just goes to show how many festivals there are in Morocco; many festivals overlap one another).

On Thursday, I attended a performance by H-Kayne, probably the most popular hip-hop act in Morocco. It was definitely a fun show, although, as a drummer, I always am a little jaded while watching a concert that does not have a live drummer. As they say, “Drum machines don’t have souls.”

Sunday was the biggest day of the festival, anyway, with performances by Darga, Barry, Band of Gnawa, and of course, Hoba Hoba Spirit. The whole afternoon and evening was a blast. Hoba’s performance was incredible: it was the hometown show for the band, so there was an even higher level of energy than normal. Because I was leaving Morocco the next morning, it also was the last Hoba Hoba Spirit concert I attended, making it a very special experience for me.

---

### **FINAL REFLECTIONS ON MOROCCO**

Throughout the course of this year, I have been exposed to many new wonderful musicians. Without a doubt, I have seen more talent in Morocco than any of the other countries I have conducted the research in.

When friends ask me, “What is Moroccan music like?” I cannot help but roll my eyes. Moroccan music is absurdly diverse: because North Africa is teeming with so many different cultural influences, the music of Morocco cannot be easily categorized. But, to answer that nagging question, Moroccan music can sound like traditional Arabian music or classical Berber music or classical Andalusian (Spanish) music or typical French music or tribal West African music...or, it can sound like a hybrid of all, or some, of those influences!



to my usual hemisphere, it was hard to believe that my year of research was almost complete.

Like my transition from Japan to India, at first, I had a bit of difficulty adjusting to life in Cuba. Simply put, I had had such a positive experience in Morocco – both in terms of my research and social life – that I actually did not want to leave Morocco at all! Either way, after a restless flight, I found myself in downtown Havana.

Truth be told, I am not in love with Havana. While the city is aesthetically pleasing, there is so much hustle in Havana that it can be quite a hassle to walk the streets alone. Needless to say, it is a fascinating city in itself; it truly is like stepping into a time capsule, as the majority of the cars are from before 1959 – not to mention that most of the buildings look like they have not been restored for five or six decades.

Access to the internet in Cuba is limited, at best, making it impossible to update my website while I was in the country. Furthermore, as a citizen of the United States, my visit to Cuba was, technically, illegal, so I did not want to attract any unwanted attention.

After attending some incredible performances, I can boldly assert that Cuban rhythms are the most enjoyable in the world.

---

### **July 5, 2008**

One muggy afternoon, I found myself on Calle Obispo, a rather busy street in Central Havana. As I was walking leisurely, ice-cream cone in hand, I stumbled upon a music shop, Longina Música, that sold both records and instruments.

As I entered the store, I immediately saw a series of ornately crafted drums. These drums could easily be mistaken for sculptures: one drum depicted a little man whose head represented the top of the drum, another was of a screaming face, and another had complex lattice of woodwork around the body of the drum. Although I have been describing drums for almost eleven months now, it is too difficult to describe phenomenal detail of these drums; please see the photographs!

The master behind these ingenious creations is Eduardo Cordova Reyes, a native of Havana. From an early age, Mr. Cordova studied music, most specifically drums and percussion. At some point in his late teens, he became interested in wood crafting; and eventually, he fused his two passions, and began crafting drums and percussion instruments.

Most interestingly, Mr. Cordova uses his dreams as inspirations for the visual blueprints of his instruments. Through an academic lens, this concept is rather intriguing; either way, after viewing some of Mr. Cordova's drums, it all makes perfect sense. His most famous drum is entitled, "El Tambor de las Siete Bocas" ("The Drum With Seven Mouths") – not the most creative of titles, but the fact that his drums even have names underscores the notion that his drums actually are more artistic than practical. As the name indicates, the drum has seven different faces; and actually, there are seven different (drum) heads on the instrument, so the player can play on any of the seven heads.

Over the course of this past year, I have encountered some amazing drums; and with that in mind, I have no doubt that Mr. Cordova's creations have the most intricate craftsmanship I have seen this year. The drums are more akin to artistic sculptures than musical instruments: he truly has crafted some very special instruments. According to the music shop owner, Mr. Cordova has won several international awards for his craftsmanship.

Much to my dismay, Mr. Cordova was out of town, at a workshop in Italy. I was able to chat with the music shop owners about his work, so I was able to learn a great deal about

him. A couple years back, a Cuban magazine called *Tropicana Internacional*, published a pretty extensive interview with him; and somewhat ironically, the article was entitled, “Cordova: el arte del tambor” (or, in English, “Cordoba: The Art of the Drum”).

If you would like to learn more about Mr. Cordova’s drums, definitely check out his [MySpace account](#), or you can read [this article about his life](#). Just a heads up, the latter is only in Spanish...

Sadly, I was unable to purchase a drum, as I was weary of bringing back anything from Cuba to the States. That said, I was blown away by what I saw, and those memories are enough for me...

Longina Música is located on Calle Obispo No. 360, between Calle Habana and Calle Compostela.

---

### **July 6, 2008**

Tucked away in Central Havana – not too far from the Malecon Boulevard – Callejón de Hamel is one of the truly legendary music venues in Cuba. Unlike the Buena Vista Social Club, a members-only club, Callejón de Hamel (Hamel Alley) is open to the public, and in turn, stands out as one of the staples of the Cuban music scene.

Founded in the early 1990s by Salvador Gonzales, a local artist, Callejón de Hamel aspires to promote the artistic abilities of the Afro-Cuban population.

The physical space itself is extraordinary: murals, sculptures and assorted artistic-creations are scattered throughout the alley. At times, the vividly bright colors of the scene are mesmerizing.

Although events are also hosted on Friday and Saturday, Sunday is the most bustling day at Callejón de Hamel. Every Sunday, local rumba artists perform free concerts for the

public.

Rumba is one of the most distinct musical genres in Cuba: while it is difficult to define rumba, as it simply needs to be heard to be understood, in essence, rumba is a heavily African-influenced Cuban music.

The offbeat rhythms of rumba make the music very unique, rhythmically. As a drummer, rumba is so engaging, because the percussion section is not locked down to a steady two-four beat. That is to say, the rhythm of rumba music is very “free” and “open” – in a sense, the rhythm of rumba has the same sort of mobility that a melody typically enjoys.

The performance I attended was very enjoyable; although, truth be told, it was not nearly the best rumba performance I saw in Cuba. Surely, Callejón de Hamel is an “authentic” Cuban experience; nevertheless, as it is mentioned in Lonely Planet’s “Must See In Havana” list, the place is, not surprisingly, swamped with tourists.

This over-exploitation explains why the “premier” rumba players no longer perform at Callejón de Hamel. That said, the space is stunningly beautiful, the music is enjoyable, and I have never been to anywhere quite like Callejón de Hamel. I wholeheartedly recommend a visit to the place.

By showcasing the most talented Afro-Cuban artists and musicians, Callejón de Hamel promotes the development and growth of the creative arts in Cuba society. Despite its recent “guidebook celebrity status,” Callejón de Hamel is an integral part of the Afro-Cuban community and well-worth a visit!

---

### **July 12, 2008**

After spending several weeks in Havana, I departed on a fourteen-hour bus ride to Santiago de Cuba, in the Orient. Santiago de Cuba, Cuba’s second-largest city, holds a

special place in Cuban history, as it was the city where Fidel Castro proclaimed victory of the Revolution in 1959.

Santiago de Cuba has a very laid-back, relaxed feel to it: there is a notable absence of the daily hustle found in Havana. Aesthetically, Santiago almost looks as if it were a Cuban (mini) version of San Francisco: the city is set on a hill that overlooks a bay. The endless rows of pastel colored houses and overhanging telephone lines also radiate a “San Fran” feel.

Every mid-July since 1980, the city hosts la Festival del Caribe, the Festival of the Caribbean – it is also known as the Fiesta de Fuego, the Fire Festival. The festival showcases the music, dance, and other various cultural intricacies of each of the countries in the Caribbean. For one week, Santiago de Cuba is overflowing with people from all over the Caribbean: it is a wonderful means to bridge cultural gaps among the people from different Caribbean countries. Each year, the festival is “dedicated” to one country, and this year, Mexico was country of honor.

The weeklong celebration includes countless activities, but the final day of the festival, which features an elaborate parade, is the true highlight of the week. Each country participates in the parade, showing off the country’s respective music and dance. Because Cuba is the host country, throughout the procession, there are representatives from all of the provinces of Cuba – compared to a single group from every other country.

The procession commences in the late afternoon and stretches until just after sunset. The heart of the festival is located in the plaza in front of Catedral de Nuestra Señora de Asunción.

Most certainly, the music during the procession is outstanding: it is such an amazing juxtaposition to hear all of the respective rhythms from each of the Caribbean countries. While each performance has a strong emphasis on dance (and the extravagant costumes

that go with it!), the music truly is the focal point of the parade. As true with all parades, drums and percussion are the cornerstone of the musical ensemble.

While I will readily admit that the majority of the rhythms of Caribbean music do not greatly differ country to country, there are many notable differences in style and form among each country's respective music. It is impossible to pinpoint my favorite performance, although I thoroughly enjoyed the cavalcades of Brazil, Trinidad & Tobago, and the Dominican Republic. The procession of Trinidad & Tobago was especially memorable, as there was a large truck with a full-kit drummer and steel drummer playing on the back. On that note, I'm sure I will never forget the fire-breathing roller-skaters, or the cross-dressing drummers that played tin cans and boxes.

As the sun began to set, the streets became more and more packed: it felt as if the entire city was partaking in the festivities. After the parade-portion of the festival ended, the festivities culminated with the Quemando del Diablo, the Burning of the Devil.

The march from the town hall in the center of the city to the effigy, located near one of the ports about a mile away, was epic, to say the least, as thousands of people were packed onto the same small street. Just before 9pm, a twenty-foot, wooden effigy of Lucifer was set ablaze. Drumming, singing, and dancing around the burning flames continued well into the night.

---

### **July 26, 2008**

Walk down almost any street in Santiago de Cuba on any summer day, and you will encounter live music. Whether it be a solo trumpeter performing in front of a park bench, or a full *son cubano* ensemble blaring out of a "casa de música," in the summer months, Santiago D.C. is just teeming with live music. For clarity: "son," like mambo, rumba or salsa, is a subgenre of Cuban music. Son, however, originates in the Oriente, and thus is most popular in the Santiago D.C.

Throughout Santiago D.C., there is a mixture of famous, marquee music halls, and smaller, lesser-known venues. Located in central Santiago, just a block from Parque Céspedes, Casa de la Trova (House of the Ballad), is one of the more popular music halls.

One evening, I ventured to Casa de la Trova, with a French friend and a Cuban friend. The band was enjoyable; however, as the Festival del Caribe had ended the night before, there was not much of a turn out, in terms of the crowd. That said, as a drummer, listening to Cuban rhythms is *always* an entertaining activity.



#### **FINAL THOUGHTS**

Throughout the course of my Bristol Fellowship, the story of the Tower of Babel, from the Book of Genesis, frequently stood out in my mind. In this biblical tale, after the Great Flood, mankind, united through one common language, sought to build a tower that would eclipse the sky and reach the gates of Heaven. Because the tower was being built to demonstrate the greatness of man, there was an absence of piety, and not surprisingly, this enraged God.

Exerting His infinite power and wisdom, God destroyed the tower, scattered mankind throughout the different corners of the world, and seemingly forever divided man by eliminating a common language.

Nonetheless, if there was one prevailing theme throughout my fellowship, it was that music is the universal language. Music transcends all physical boundaries and barriers: I conducted research in the South Pacific, East Asia, South Asia, Western Europe, North Africa and the Caribbean.

Although music can be very personal, music is a communal experience: the rhythms, melodies and harmonies of man are always to be shared by all citizens of the world.

The spiritual essence of music is that music serves as a means to connect, and thus unite, humanity. The drum is the foundation of (almost) all music, and music can be the vehicle to the Divine. Through music, we can see how painfully similar man really is.

While on my Bristol Fellowship, I interacted with drummers and drum crafters who were Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, Shintoists, and atheists. Regardless of any labels or affiliations, it is clear that music knows no religion: it is a religion within itself.

Yet, like any religion, music can be astoundingly complex, albeit ubiquitous. Within the scope of drum crafting and drumming, to this day, I am still fascinated by the countless variations of techniques in the crafting of the instrument, and of the seemingly innumerable schools of drumming theory.

Country to country, the role of the drumming, and the drum itself, differs. Indeed, drums are everywhere; nonetheless, the spectrum of drumming – both the performance of the instrument and the crafting of instrument– seems to be infinite.

The paradox of the drum is that although it is a constant throughout (almost) every culture of the world, the drum is subject to a myriad of variations. It is often forgotten that, aside from vocals, drums are the first instrument man created: the primitive essence of the drum helps explain how one instrument can have so many variations in both its crafting and performance.

Thank you so much for this incredible opportunity.