

A Lesson in Djembe

By Denise Jayawardene

Doundoum tick tick, doundoum tick tick. I heard the sounds of African drums vibrating through the church halls. I followed the signs to the Alpha Rhythm Roots Djembe class and opened the door. Alpha, the instructor, gave us a warm welcome and told us to grab a Djembe from the back room and form a half circle around him. He began to explain the basics: slap, tone, and bass by pointing to areas on the drum face. Alpha played a pattern and then we were asked to repeat it. He taught us the basic patterns first, then a few drum rolls (to begin and end a pattern) and drum signals (to instruct players to switch to another pattern).

The Djembe, pronounced 'jem-bey', is a West African handmade drum carved out of a single piece of Guinea wood to form the drumshell with a piece of stretched goatskin to cover the drumhead. Most drumshells have artistic carvings; etchings of symbols, patterns and animals. Drum rhythms are played for special ceremonies like weddings, full moon & Ramadan. The Djembe is played by hand, standing or sitting down. Djembes are a part of the orchestra of drums at these ceremonies. In class, each student is also taught to play the accompanying drums such as the 'Doundoumba'- the low base, 'Sangban'- the middle pitch base, 'Kenkeni'- the high pitch drums and 'Kenke'- the iron cow bell. The Doundoumba, Sangban and Kenkeni are made out of a tree trunk or oil barrels and are played with drum sticks.

I observed one of Alpha's advanced classes; these students' rhythms were passionate and lively; both hands coordinated, one hand tapping the Kenke bell keeping to tempo and the other beating the drum while tapping their toes and drumming in sync. If you closed your eyes, you would think their music sounded like a whole orchestra yet; there were only four students in the room.

Alpha is a djembe teacher, conductor and performer. Alpha is a common Puel (or Fulani) name in Guinea. He prefers to be called just Alpha. He speaks both Canadian

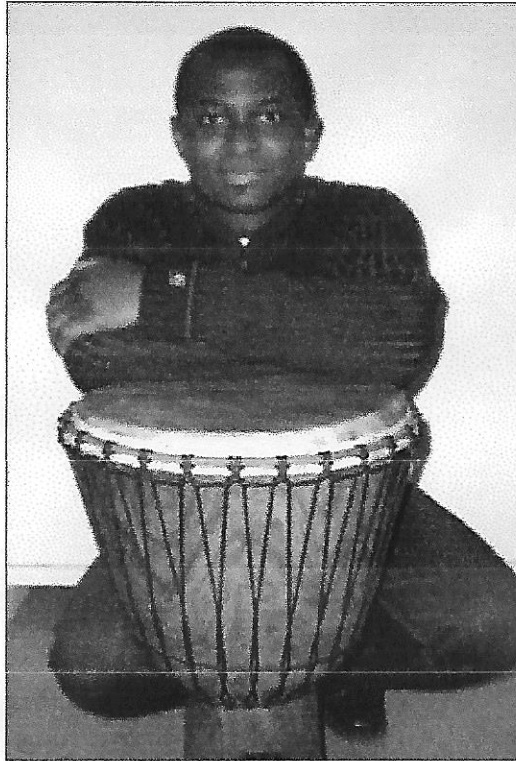
languages fluently and occasionally switches between the two in class for his students. "My parents always used to listen to traditional music from West Africa at home in France. I went to music school (in France) but, I learned percussion from various world renowned master drummers like Mamady Keita and Famoudou Konate who are originally from West Africa. I have attended their higher level workshops and I continue to learn more by going back home to Guinea to see live concerts."

"My advice to a beginner would be to learn from someone who is from the tradition of the Djembe, from Guinea, Mali or from that region. I see a lot of people play in Toronto and I can see that it has been taken out of context," he explains. Alpha uses a holistic approach to teaching, "Djembe and percussion instruments are just a part of the whole experience, a part of the orchestra ensemble, and I teach with that in mind. In a real performance, there is usually a dance choreography

that goes with each rhythm as well."

Alpha says, "A common perception is that you can just play this instrument (without instruction), so that's what got me started in teaching - to help breakdown the complexities of the Djembe for students."

He adds, "If you want to take this seriously, you need to practice, just like anything else- results are



Alpha and his djembe. Photo by Denise Jayawardene

directly proportional to the hard work you put into it." Alpha also conducts two hour intensive classes once a month for those interested in taking their Djembe experience to the next level.

Alpha also has an impressive list of performances under his belt, "My most memorable performances were for Free the Children, the Cadbury's fashion shows and our yearly performances at the Toronto Libraries events." While most of Alpha's performances are at private events such as fundraisers, corporate team building, and schools and university celebrations, you can check out his website for upcoming public performances.

You can drop into Alpha Rhythm Roots Djembe for \$20 a class or purchase the \$90 six credit based classes. As a student you also receive access to his website, www.alpharhythmroots.com, so you can practice at home in between classes.

Toronto Art: A New Beginning? After all, maybe not.

By Victoria Basova

Toronto prides itself for being a city full of diversity, multiculturalism and an abundance of gallery art, bringing to the eager viewer the gems from across the globe. However, one might ask, what are we doing on a city level to make way for art? For some, the answer seemed to come in The Beautiful City Project.

Beautiful City is a coalition of organizations and individuals who, since the early 2000s, have fought for the taxation of billboards in Toronto to create more funds for art programs around the city. Thanks in part to their energetic campaign, in December

2009, the billboard tax passed, which means an extra \$10.4 million a year will filter into city coffers. Organizers at Beautiful City were elated: to them, such a bill meant more than a dollar value and the regulation of corporate advertising; it meant support of local artists, inspiration within communities and access to creativity and self-evolution.

However, a new issue quickly emerged. The City of Toronto's budget allocation, despite numerous promises from councilors to ensure the revenues go towards the arts, is now being discussed to go elsewhere. "Everybody said it was going to go to the arts. But

arts are going to be flat lined and the money will go to social programs instead" says Devon Ostrom, Beautiful City Coordinator.

Over March, Toronto's city council will be discussing the 2010 operating budget. Beautiful City has been urging its members to contact officials and request that billboard tax monies be directed to arts and culture, even providing arguments and statistics on their website to support the argument. The next month will decide the fate of the Beautiful City Project.

For more information, visit www.beautifulcity.ca.