

NOTES ON NEW AND OLD WORLD AFRICAN DRUMMING: JUST PLAYING IT LIKE YOU MEAN IT IS NOT PLAYING

by

DAVID COPLAN

Certainly the most lasting impression I brought home from my "hippie summer" of 1968 in Berkeley, California was of those fierce conga drum ensembles that gathered almost daily in lower Sproul Plaza. Then, as now, there was great variation in the quality of the playing. On one set of benches sat a motley crew of drum thumpers, banging away without Time; sound and fury signifying egotism and indiscipline. At a deliberate distance sat another ensemble, three or four dignified black men well past adolescence in every sense, the conga (*golpe*) melody drum and the lead or *quinto* placed properly on either side of the bass (*tumbao*). Their rhythms were complex yet clearly articulated, restrained yet thoroughly compelling, relentlessly goading the body and spirit into dance.

Here, I thought, was that combination of intellectual order, physical involvement, interpersonal communication and spiritual high that my student researches into aesthetic hedonism had led me to seek. Afro-Latin percussion as the ultimate answer to mind-body dualism. Back at university in Massachusetts I bought myself a pretty good *quinto* for the money (I didn't even know enough to understand I must start with a *tumbao*) and went off alone to commune with the gods of air, water, earth and fire. The summer of 1969 found me in the Fens, Boston's watery public park, tapping away, seated on a bench on the edge of a deserted baseball diamond in dogged isolation. One day a tall, austere looking, very black man walked by, stopped and said, "Look, man, hasn't anybody hipped you?" My failure to understand the question at least made obvious the correct answer: "No." "Well here, man," he said, leaning over and tapping out the proper hand patterns for the bass part of the famous Afro-Cuban rhythm rumba *guaguanco*. "Just do that: I'll check you in two weeks," and he went his way. Something in his voice told me I'd better stick to the program, so for two weeks I did just that, no changes, no variations, no experiments, just bass *guaguanco*, for hours.

Two weeks later he was back. "Okay, man, I'm Les Lumley. You got a car? Pick me up at my place and we'll come out here tomorrow." I was stunned with gratitude. He had a regular lift to the Fens, a gofer and a bass ostinato. A few days each week for the rest of the summer I sat on a bench in the Fens, playing bass patterns over and over and over and over again, while Les, a professional jazz *congero* who was playing with the likes of Rahsaan Roland Kirk, hit out solos on his beautiful old conga and quinto, eyes half closed in concentration, his head inclined slightly to the right and heavenward. I was not allowed, on punishment of loud-talking and looks-that-kill, to solo or vary my part in any way. Oh, yes: no beer, no dope - "Fucks up your playing, man." How did I stand it? — I was a beginner but the Lord had blessed me with Time; I was fitting in, I was performing an essential musical role, I was learning from one of the greats, I was playing *music* — I was ecstatic.

By playing music I mean I was playing by the rules: Stay with the tempo, stay on the beat, don't take risks, support your brothers, listen, stay *off* the other brother's sound and *out* of his space. A conga drum ensemble is a set of precisely coordinated linear parts, staggered in relation to the first beat of the bass measure. An iron bell, called a cow bell, and sometimes two sticks beaten on a wooden surface (*palidos*) often serve to establish the basic time line, but the important thing is that each drummer start his pattern on a different beat or half beat from all the others. This allows every part to be articulated and heard clearly in the composition of a single complex contrapuntal percussion melody. The cardinal rule is never come in "on top" of another man, to cover his sounds with yours. The metaphor here is vocal, just as language and the voice — and not the drums — are the wellsprings of African music, the quintessential African musical instruments. Converse with, question and answer your brother, don't talk at the same time. Doing this means not playing too much. Don't drain your part of its power with a flood of beats; just print clearly in the space provided. This principle is especially evident in the playing of older masters, who no longer care to exhaust themselves with dense pyrotechnics. They play cleanly, succinctly, the right notes in *exactly* the right places: saying little but saying it all, *never* losing themselves or the Beat.

So I hung in with Les and earned what I was due of that most precious of human possessions, respect. I recall vividly the times other virtuosos would happen by, hear us, and sit down to trade shots with Les. On such occasions I would be required to keep pace with the rising tempo, pumping in the bass for all I was worth for an hour or more non-stop. How did I do it? I can't explain it. Somehow after a while the repetitive playing, the involvement in the ensemble, the Groove gets inside you and begins to *give* you energy rather than use it up. You are like a surfer riding a huge but instinctively predictable wave: if you can just feel the water, "taste the wave" as Sean Penn said in *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*, and keep your balance, you will float on the Power and reach the shore. Afterwards Les would say: "You're getting it man — now I can go to lunch and do my laundry and come back and still find you playin' it." Or better yet, "Hey, man, you're playin' music".

Over that summer I gradually learned the bass patterns for the three rumbas (*guaguanco*, *yambu*, *columbia*) as well as *mambo*, *conga*, *cumbia*, *bembe*, *lukumi*, *chacha*, *merengue*, and *samba*. These rhythms vary from one another not so much in time signature (*bembe* is played in 6/8 time, the others usually in 4/4) as in timbre and tone color using the conga's three basic sounds, "bass", "tone", and "snap"; by relations between sounds and silences; by "signature" (the identifying series of tones making a repetitive percussion tune), by accentual pattern, emphasis, feel. A good example of these differences can be heard on the classic double album by Mongo Santamaria, *Afro Roots*, in the introduction to "Che-que-re-que-che-que," where two pairs of drummers deliberately play a rumba *guaguanco* against a *merengue*, both in 4/4. The title of the piece is a mnemonic for the opening 16th note roll of the *merengue*. The conflict is both disturbing and exciting: this cannot last, which will win out? It is the lionly *guaguanco*, the king of beats.

With this training I discovered I could sit down with any competent drummers, anywhere, and come right in with only a single word of instruction: the name of the next rhythm of choice. I learned a great deal by simply playing my part until I could do it

without thought, putting the "signature" pattern in the "push-down storage" of coordinated mental and muscular habituation, and then listening intently to the other players' statements, absorbing the vocabulary of rhythm. While the underlying cowbell and palidos were inherently present if not actually there, quite often no one would play the foundation pattern for the rhythm: it had become Time itself, so start playing on the next level. Or the next. Though I would often try complicated licks, tricks, and phrases when I practised alone, it was not by such repeated trial and error that I shifted from bass to conga and quinto and finally became a soloist myself. Rather I would sit down at those two drums and begin to play the signature as usual. As I began to get comfortable, somehow solo phrases and riffs would emerge organically, almost uncannily, from the pattern, as if the mule hide beneath my hands were sounding of its own accord. I wouldn't think about what to play; my hands would just play it. The beauty of this process was that, unlike the usual awkward conscious attempts to fit a newly mastered riff into a structured pattern, the new solo statements always worked. As in animated conversation or a contest of wits, I didn't know what I had to say until I said it, yet the right words were there, my fingertips choosing spontaneously from the vocabulary of rhythm. So my rule became, don't think about it, don't force it, don't interrupt, but when you've got that rhythmic itch just scratch it.

Over the years I had many opportunities to perform with my betters. In Ghana as a student with the Ghana National Dance Ensemble, I struggled with the famous highlife and *kpanlogo* popular dance rhythms. There, the drummers taught rhythms with the aid of vocables, sonic mnemonics based on the syllables of the Twi language which, like virtually all black African languages except Arabic-syncretised Hausa and Swahili, is tonal. Drums are therefore made to talk Twi and, for teaching purposes, Twi to speak drums. Another method of instruction was for the teacher to sit behind you and hit you on your left and right shoulder blades according to the pattern of left and right-hand beats you were to play. Somehow getting punched sharply from behind while trying to memorise a pattern was distracting for me and I did not learn well. Different wacks for different Jacks. In Ghana too I met up again with my Boston brother, the incomparable *congero* Jumma Santos, who with instinctive self-educative wisdom kept his ears open and his tongue and hands humble the whole time he was there. When Jumma hadn't seen you for a while he would greet you by enquiring, "What you been playin'?" You were supposed to start in on some original and intriguing signature, and if it struck him that you were "playin' something", as opposed to "playin' nothing" he would join in up top on conga and quinto. I also made fast friends with the Anglo-Ghanaian guitarist and social historian of West African popular music, E. John Collins, with whom I spent many an afternoon playing "palm wine" highlife over, appropriately enough, many a calabash of palm wine.

South Africa however was the scene of my most professional performing experience, with Philip Thabane and Gabriel Thobejane in Malombo, and with Andrew Tracey and the Steelband. "Mabee" Thobejane, the diminutive Mosotho and Dave Coplan, the too-tall Jew, were and are true kindred spirits, the Mutt and Jeff of "progressive" Transvaal African percussion. Not that I would ever compare myself musically with Mabee, that sly-mule master of the kudu skins. When we played gigs in Johannesburg, Thobejane would stay together, and observe a strict regimen: Wake up late in the

morning, get rid of last night's girls. Then wash. After that cook, then eat, then dress up. Then smoke marijuana. Then go play. This process took ten hours, but at the end of it the mind-body duality wasn't even a memory. On stage Mabee played like a man both possessed and self-possessed. Dance and percussion were interchangeable, quite literally in fact, since when he slipped seamlessly from beats to steps his chest beads and anklet shakers kept on playing. And he could get a song of rhythm out of anything. Mabee used a tin can with a rubbing stick stuck in the bottom as a kind of home-made version of the Brazilian *cuica*. One night he was rubbing away on this thing backing up Philip Thabane's electric guitar when Philip apparently decided he was making too much out of it and abruptly walked off into the wings, leaving Mabee with nothing but his stick and can in his hands. Undaunted, he concentrated his soul in that can and began a rubbing-stick solo in front of the mike. It cried, it whistled, it swooped and whooped like a crane, it swelled with feedback, filling the vast house, it grew into a tree, the wind shivering its branches. The applause started slowly, afraid to disturb the uncanny, but then rose to a roar. Mabee had won: Philip came back on stage, his eyes smiling with pride, and ripped open the applause with his guitar. Thabane himself is profound, idiosyncratic, finicky and insouciant, both as a man and as a musician: one of the most original mind-bodies in African music. He had an easier time cooling me out when my drum solos swelled into egotism. He would just stroll over to the amp and turn my mike up to max. At that level even a light stroke would send waves of distorted reverberation through the house. I got a good lesson in both ensemble and percussive dynamics, especially in the *pianissimo* range.

Playing with the Andrew Tracey Steelband taught me calypso, that too-near relation of the merengue and highlife, as well as how to deal with through-composed song structure, breaks, changes and all. Andrew Tracey is, like his father Hugh, a world-renowned ethnomusicologist and both a spiritual and intellectual devotee of new and old world African music. I recall one *matinée* performance at City Hall in Durban when Andrew decided the steel drums needed tuning about an hour before show time. An hour and a quarter later, as the audience shifted uneasily in their seats, Andrew was still up there, dinging and thumping with hammer and chisel at the melody-making bumps in those old oil drums in oblivious concentration. The audience didn't know it, but that was really music.

Andrew Tracey is still an ethnomusicologist's ethnomusicologist. Philip Thabane and Gabriel Thobejane have parted. Philip still leads Malombo, with new young drummers and no compromise in the quirky expressionism of his music, telling international audiences what he thinks of it all in lyrics sung in Shangaan. Mabee plays and dances up a storm with the superb African jazz fusion band "Sakhile". I got a Ph.D. so I could flog lounge lizardry as ethnomusicology and have an excuse for being so absent-minded.

But in playing my rules always served me well, and gained me entrance to performance situations that my limited ability as a soloist did not otherwise merit. More creative soloists were, on occasion, even asked to "lay out" and let reliable Dave, the humble metronome, handle the drum. In a band, of course, you don't just play rhythms, you play numbers or songs. The breaks and changes written into band pieces require more conscious attention to what you play when, and demand cadence, stopping and starting with specific phrases along with everyone else. Even so, with your signature

pattern on automatic pilot, you could listen for and anticipate the breaks and changes **naturally** with very few rehearsals; something useful in a drummer. I recall my first appearance on congas with the Indiana University Latin Music Ensemble, during which our leader turned and announced, "Okay, 'Guantanamera'." I had never rehearsed the tune with the group, but every *congero* has to know this Latin chestnut and that it's a *cha cha*. So I came right in. Finally, this approach to playing provided access to that most precious of all performance experiences, the Groove. This is when communication and mutual support among players becomes so complete that the music and its direction take on a life of their own, lifting and propelling the ensemble like a flock of swallows in an updraft. A drummer who feels the Groove has no reason to ask himself why he's a musician, or for that matter why the good Lord put him on this earth.

For band percussionists let me add a few final thoughts. Remember you are in the rhythm section. Your real job is to **support** the other players and, like Atlas with the world on his shoulders, you must never lay your burden down. A band with a hot rhythm section is also by nature a dance band, even if no one is dancing at the moment. The support you must give your fellow players goes double for dancers, for whom "it don't mean a thing if it ain't got that swing." When I'm on the dance floor myself, I practise feeling the rhythm by continuing to dance the basic steps even during the number's breaks and changes. If I'm in exactly the right place when the band comes in again after a break then I've got it. Every leader knows that a tolerable band can get away with almost anything except uncertain rhythm. A good example is the song "Monique" on the Zairean Lokassa ya Mbongo's phenomenally popular album *Adiza*. The vocal and horn parts are predictable and even silly, but the rhythm section, which here includes the group's brilliant lead guitarist, just cooks along so irrepressibly it's a great number anyway. So keep pumping in that rhythm pattern that says "Let's dance", take your place among your fellows, be humble and take pride in an indispensable job well done, better safe than sorry, don't solo if you've nothing to say, and when in doubt, lay out.