

PERCUSSION CAROLYN BOYD FINDS THAT BANGING OUT AFRICAN BEATS CAN BE A TRULY UPLIFTING AND ADDICTIVE EXPERIENCE

Drum up some enthusiasm

There aren't many people who, when presented with a set of bongo drums, can resist the temptation to tap out a few beats. It's a sound that in an instant can make you feel as though you're by a campfire under African skies.

It's easy to see, therefore, why an African drumming circle can be very addictive, even if it's in North London. Within five minutes of entering Somesh De Swardt's Sunday morning drum session, the powerful sound of 15 people spontaneously jamming together on large bongo drums has already taken me to a land much further away than the Islington Arts Factory.

According to De Swardt you don't necessarily have to have natural rhythm to enjoy it. 'Anyone with a heartbeat can learn drumming,' he says, 'all it takes is ten minutes to get into it.' And he is right. Ten minutes on, and the loud uplifting beats already have me hooked.

Thirty-year-old De Swardt came to the UK six years ago after being a member of a drum circle in his native South Africa. 'There didn't seem to be as many opportunities to learn African drumming here as there were in Johannesburg,' he says, 'so I set up a monthly drum circle.'

The demand was so great that, by the time he finished an IT contract job two-and-a-half years ago, De Swardt was able to ditch his computing career and teach drumming full-time.

With weekly workshops in Islington, Bushey, Hertfordshire, and Godalming, Surrey, as well as corporate work and school classes, it seems the Brits are catching on.

Heartbeat

While creating the music is fun in itself, drumming also has some fantastic health benefits. A study carried out in the US found that a two-hour session of drumming every week for six



Drummer boy: Somesh De Swardt

Pictures: Andy Blackmore

weeks improved the participants' mood by 50 per cent.

'Even a half-hour drumming session can make you relaxed,' says De Swardt. 'It's physical exercise, you improve your breathing and it can help your co-ordination.'

De Swardt is also keen to emphasise that drumming circles are a fantastic way of building communities. And, whether it's with your colleagues or just other young professionals wanting to do something

different (as was the case in Islington), there is certainly something special about sitting in a circle and creating a set of uplifting rhythms with the other people in the group.

Grab anything

After teaching us some new beats from West Africa, we are each given a percussion instrument – drums, maracas, shakers, bongos. De Swardt then allocates each of us a different beat – and words to remember it with – to tap out. My beat is: 'I. Love.

Chocolate. Cake.' It's not difficult for a chocoholic to remember (how did he know?).

Then, with all the confidence and directorial prowess of an orchestral conductor, De Swardt introduces each of our beats one or two at a time, to build up to a booming symphony of sound.

It is a fantastic experience and – despite the fact that the palms of my hands are throbbing after two hours of tapping out beats – nothing is going to stop me from making a return visit to this little corner of Africa in the middle of Islington.

■ Drumjam costs £7 per session. Tel: 0773 9847690, 0870 1993264 or www.drumjam.co.uk

OTHER CLASSES

African drumming isn't the only style on offer. Latin and Indian rhythm patterns are also popular, as is fusion.

■ Latin percussion (Level 1)

The course for beginners and intermediates alike introduces the basics of Latin percussion, with the emphasis on group playing. City Lit, from Apr 24, £60, seniors: £36, concs £18. Tel: 0870 1607338.

■ Afro-Caribbean Fusion

Covers traditional Afro-Caribbean contemporary and street dance styles, culminating in a presentation evening in the final week, with live drumming accompaniment. Brady Arts Centre, Tower Hamlets Lifelong Learning Service, from Sep 21, 85p per hour. Tel: 0870 3814433.



■ Indian Rhythm and Percussion

Foundation certificate in music introducing the principles of Indian rhythm as well as practical tuition in many techniques. Experience is preferable but not essential, as Indian ensembles traditionally incorporate a

wide range of ability. Goldsmiths College, from Sept 21, £65, students (on certain benefits) £10. Tel: 020 7919 7766.

■ Afro-Latin Percussion

Foundation certificate in music giving access to the instruments, styles, techniques and culture of Afro-Latin percussion. Through ensemble and solo playing, the music incorporates traditional rhythm patterns used in Afro-Cuban and Afro-Brazilian music. Goldsmiths College, from Apr 28, details as above.



Circle of drummers: De Swardt gets the group's beat going

Edited by JAMES ELLIS travel@ukmetro.co.uk