

Fusing My Life With Brazilian and Mediterranean Rhythms



By Layne Redmond

When I took my first tambourine lesson from Glen Velez in 1981, there were only a few people in the U.S. who had discovered the extraordinary depth and beauty of the various frame drumming styles existing around the world. Since then, all has changed as we have witnessed the renaissance of traditional frame drum styles and the widespread fusion of these techniques from different cultures. Today, it's not uncommon to see these new styles utilized in early music, contemporary classical music, pop, jazz, and world music.

Since the turn of the millennium, my personal focus has been on creating a fusion of what inspires me from Mediterranean and Brazilian rhythmic traditions. For the past five years I have had an apartment in Salvador, in the state of Bahia in Brazil. Here in this magical city I have been a volunteer teacher at the percussion department at UFBA, the federal university, and also at the music school Escola Pracatum in Candéal, founded by the amazing percussionist/pop star Carlinhos Brown, who was born in this poor but very special neighborhood.

I've also been traveling to the Greek side of the Mediterranean island of Cyprus to teach a group of dedicated students to play the frame drum. The indigenous tradition of frame drumming in the Greek Cypriot area appears to have died out in the latter half of the 20th century, yet the archaeological record shows that from c.1200 BCE until approximately 500 CE, the women of ancient Cyprus were renown frame drummers. After finding my book, *When the Drummers Were Women*, which includes a chapter on these ancient drummers, a group formed to bring me there to teach workshops. A band of serious students have continued their studies with master percussionist Zohar Fresco, who travels from Israel several times a year to expand their studies.

In 2007, I joined Zohar with the core group of these drummers for a concert attended by the ambassador from Israel and officials from the Cypriot Culture of Ministry. [You can view a rehearsal with Zohar and me at www.youtube.com/watch?v=DrtK7gkE2Zg&feature=channel_page.]

Playing with Zohar was an amazing experience; he is a one-person fusion of almost every existing frame drum technique in the world and one of the most generous and supportive percussionists I have ever played with. Out of the excitement and inspiration generated from this event, we began a new recording project, *Invoking Aphrodite*, using ancient Greek texts chanted by the women drummers of Cyprus. We recorded two of the oldest surviving notated musical compositions, "The Hymn to the Muse," written by Mesomedes of Crete in 147 CE, and "The Epitaph of Seikilos," engraved on a tombstone around 300 BCE, and we set other ancient hymns to new compositions created for the project. Most of the musical tracks were recorded in Salvador while the women of Cyprus chanted the ancient Greek in a studio in Cyprus, and through the magic of the Internet we downloaded it into our studio in Brazil.

In the spring of 2007, I was invited to teach at Tamburi Mundi, a frame drum festival in Sicily. For a week we were all immersed in traditional and evolving south Italian and Sicilian frame drumming, and it was particularly thrilling to see the young group TrizziRiDonna fusing dance, chanting, and frame drumming. [View a TrizziRiDonna video at www.myspace.com/trizziridonna.]

There I also filmed Birjan Chimirani's workshop on Persian frame drums, where I learned some inspiring new rhythms. Afterwards I went on to Egypt to visit Swedish percussionist Fredrik Gille in Cairo, where he was studying Arabic and playing with the local musicians. Fredrik has also created an extremely interesting and unique fusion of frame drumming techniques. [Check out his technique on a hybrid kanjira: www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gsm9gudI2Vo&feature=channel_page] He arranged for me to see a powerful presentation of a traditional pre-Islamic healing ritual, called a Zar, in which women played tars, a medium-sized frame drum without jingles. Fredrik also introduced me to a young Arabic percussionist



named Hany Bedair, who was extremely generous and allowed me to videotape him playing many of the local rhythms on riq, the Arabic tambourine. Hany introduced me to Rania Taher Ibrahim, a young Egyptian riq player who also kindly allowed me to film her [www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hwox0T3613Y&feature=channel_page].

Mizo Mohamed Gamal, a young godson of the late, great Nubian musician Hamza El Din, was another percussionist I was fortunate to meet through Fredrik. I was particularly struck by the similarity in feel between what Mizo played and what I was experiencing in Brazil [www.youtube.com/watch?v=_A2sUqgb0d4&feature=channel_page].

And now on to Brazil, where I am happy to testify that Brazilians have good reason to call Salvador, a tropical city blessed by the spirit of Africa, "The Land of Happiness"! *Time* magazine describes Salvador as "the New Orleans of Brazil," for the capital city of Bahia has given birth to many of the greatest stars in Brazilian music—Joao Gilberto, Dorival Caymmi, Caetano Veloso, Gilberto Gil, Gal Costa, Maria Bethania, Tom Zé, Carlinhos Brown, and Olodum among many others. Salvador was the first capital of colonial Brazil, and from 1500 to 1815, Salvador was the largest and most impor-

tant port in the Americas. The sugar produced from the plantation system sustained by African and indigenous slave labor in the northeast and the gold and diamonds from the mines in the southeast all passed through Salvador.

More powerfully than any other place in the world, Bahia provided a fertile space for the ethnic diversity of African origin to merge with other influences and to forge a rich and authentic cultural ethos. Here the fusion of the Americas took place, giving birth to a unique identity, one that is present in a smaller or larger scale throughout the whole of Brazil. In the realm of music this is what gave rise to the birth of samba and all the variety of Brazilian percussion instruments.

—Brazilian percussionist Nana Vasconcelos

Bahia is a musical matrix defined by rhythm and luscious melody, busily absorbing and transmuting musical traditions from all over the planet and stamping this new fusion with a sound all its own. At the core of this world jam are the primordial rhythms of Africa. It is a triumph of the human spirit that the experience of slavery gave birth to rhythms and chants whose essence enabled people to survive through generations of slavery followed by abandonment to poverty. These rhythms, preserved in the *candomblé terreiros* and the joyous *samba de roda* (circle dances), uplift, transcend, and transport participants into an elevated sense of well being that comes from being conscious only of keeping in ecstatic time with everyone else.

The traditions of *candomblé*, like Cuban *Santería* and *Vodoun* from Haiti, are rooted in ancient West African religious traditions. By identifying the African deities, called the *orixás*, with Catholic saints, the *orixás* were hidden within the religion the Africans were forced to embrace. The earliest sacred houses or *terreiros*, the ritual ceremonial places of worship for *candomblé*, were built in Bahia.

Candomblé views the universe as a manifestation of the spiritual and creative force called *axé*, the Yoruban word for the infinite and all-pervading creative energy of the universe that supports consciousness and animates the mind and body. The American jazz concept of “cool” is directly derived from this African concept of *axé*; it is the mystic coolness, the ability to remain generous, calm, and confident, no matter how dire outer circumstances may be. The *orixás* are perceived as fundamental manifestations and transmitters of *axé*. They are thought to move in the human realm as living, vibrating Truth and represent the forces of nature that are invoked by the chanting, dancing, and drumming.

The rhythms and dances of *candomblé* are specific to each of the *orixás*. In the traditional African call-and-response structure, the music consists of chanting supported by the percus-

sion ensemble of *agogo* bell and three sizes of *atabaque* drums. The *atabaque* is the Brazilian version of the conga, and three sizes are used in the rituals: the smallest and highest pitched is the *Le*; the largest and deepest sounding solo drum is the *Rum*; and the *Rumpi* is the medium sized and pitched drum. From the roots of *candomblé* these powerful trance rhythms gave birth to samba and are certainly a deep source continually feeding the new music, dance, and art flowing out of Salvador. [Video of a traditional *candomblé* dance class: www.youtube.com/watch?v=i6acWOMTrts&feature=channel_page.]

Bahia is also the birthplace of samba, the music most non-Brazilians think of when they think of Brazilian music. The *samba bateria*, the percussion ensemble, typically includes *surdos* (bass drum), *caixas* (snare drum), *repiniques* (high-pitched double-headed drum, played with a stick by one hand while the other hand plays directly on the skin), *pratos* (cymbals), *tambourims* (four-inch frame drum played with a stick), *cuicas* (friction drum), *reco-reco*s (metallic scraper), and my favorites, the *agogo* bells and the *pandeiro*, the Brazilian tambourine. [Video of the guys in my band playing samba: www.youtube.com/watch?v=sS63pVseRhA&NR=1]

Through volunteer teaching at the percussion department at UFBA, I made connections to

many of the younger musicians in Salvador. I couldn't have found a better way to make a place for myself in the city. Many of the finest percussion players from the most famous *blocos* like *Olodum* and *Ile Aye* have connected to the percussion department through the program *The Multipliers*, created by Jorge Sacramento, the head professor of the percussion department. The purpose of this program is to teach these players to read notated music by having them study the notated rhythms from their own bands. Jorge has focused the percussion department on an extremely powerful blend of classical western music and the folkloric traditions of Bahia, plus music that fuses these two traditions. He also puts on a fantastic three-day percussion festival every November. [My percussion ensemble at the UFBA Percussion Festival, Nov. 28, 2006: www.youtube.com/watch?v=Abg8A-VI6Wg&feature=channel_page.]

Out of my classes at UFBA I developed a core group of dedicated students of the frame drum who were also interested in combining their traditional percussion with what I was doing on the tambourine [class at UFBA http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6AC6Ycg6F14&feature=channel_page]. Through the drummers I met Tadeu Mascarenhas, a young recording engineer, producer, and wonderful keyboard player, who has become my invaluable co-producer

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on the four projects I've recorded in Salvador. These young musicians grew up immersed in the musical traditions of Brazil but also playing American and English rock and funk. Ubaldo Oliveira's grandmother is a priestess of *candomblé*; he was playing *atabaque* in ceremonies by age six, plays today with *Motomba*, and directs the *bloco Akidara*. Moisés Lama has played with *Olodum*, *Ile Aye*, *Os Zarabe*, and *Daniela Mercury*. Gil Santiago is one of only three percussionists in the state orchestra of Bahia and won the coveted *Troféu Caymi*, awarded to the most outstanding musician in Bahia. Paulo Lima is now based in Spain playing with a number of European bands.

One thing I have come to understand is that there are many varying versions of traditional

rhythms in Salvador. The guys in my band are all from different neighborhoods, which all seem to have their own take on each rhythm. And these rhythms are constantly being modified by their use in Brazilian pop songs and under the influence of rap, reggae, and club from the U.S., Caribbean and the U.K. There's a lot of stuff going on in Salvador among the younger musicians that doesn't fall into the more classic categories of Bahian music—samba rock, samba progressivo, stylistic trance, *nosso bossa*, and *electronica* are some of the terms floating around. I'm seeing performance art/multimedia/musical events that remind me much of my time in the Manhattan performance art/new music scene of the early to late 1980s. [Banda Thris, three cellos and Gil Santiago on percussion: www.youtube.com/watch?v=CuGK1eADH-s&feature=channel_page.]

For my ears, Brazil has the most compellingly interesting expression of rock music today. Even heavy metal/grunge has got a foothold here along with rap, funk, blues, jazz, reggae, and blazing guitar rock *ala* Jimi Hendrix, Eric Clapton, Jeff Beck, David Gilmour, the Allman Brothers, and Jimmy Page. Although I grew up listening to rock and black soul—Aretha Franklin, James Brown, and all the Motown crowd—somehow I had never connected to Pink Floyd. The musicians in the band I formed sat me down and made me watch *The Wall*. It amazed me that these young musicians grew up steeped in the same music I had along with all their wonderful Brazilian traditions.

Our first recording project, *The Wave of Bliss*, fused many of the Mediterranean-influenced rhythms I was teaching with Bahian rhythms, but on this project improvisation was really the bud from which everything flowered. We would choose a rhythm we had worked on in class, the five percussionists would decide what instrument and part they would play, and then we would record live without a click track or separation. In fact, the studio was so tiny we really were on top of each other—so we really got a true Brazilian feel! On some of the pieces Tadeu improvised live with us on keyboards. Later, Tadeu and I would decide where to go melodically, bringing in singers and guitar players.

The percussion on the cut

"Whirled Jam" is an Armenian-influenced tambourine rhythm in ten over Bahian samba with the *surdo* holding down the basic 2/4 samba meter, accenting the second beat with a deep, open sound that closes back on the first beat, a muted stroke. The *agogo* bell is playing a repeating rhythm in five, and the guitarist brought a reggae lilt to it all.

On "Amyrta," Gil Santiago is playing the *agogo* bell like a melody instrument, riffing off the deep feel of the traditional *ijexá* rhythm while I am playing a *bendir*, a north African frame drum with a buzzing snare string stretched across the skin. In *candomblé*, *ijexá* is associated with the Afro-Brazilian deity Oxum, the beautiful goddess of sweet waters. *Ijexá* completely permeates the folkloric and popular musical culture of Bahia. With the *agogo* improvising out of this deep root, the *conga* and *pandeiro* answered back with the flavor of this pervasive rhythm. [You can hear *ijexá* in this link: www.youtube.com/watch?v=CpL18p1n8yI.]

On "Heart's Oasis," I'm playing a Moroccan influenced rhythm in six against a traditional *candomblé* *agogo* part. And the title cut, "Wave of Bliss," is based on a 22-minute keyboard and percussion improvisation with two *pandeiros*, two *berimbaus*, *surdo*, and a tambourine I played like a *clavé*. *Pandeiro* and *berimbau*, along with *conga*, are the traditional percussion instruments of *capoeira*, the Afro-Brazilian art form that fuses martial arts with music and dance. So "Wave of Bliss" actually has a blues/rock feel through the keyboards and electric guitars, while the underpinning is drawn from the roots of *capoeira*. [Video: www.youtube.com/watch?v=BqX_FCBjoHk&feature=channel_page]

In "Cult Table," my tambourine takes the role of a traditional 6/8 *agogo* bell pattern played with *pandeiro* and *atabaques* (the traditional pre-conga folkloric drum of *candomblé*). In Salvador, the *pandeiro* is not generally played in *candomblé*, so once again we are using a traditional instrument but riffing off of a fusion of *candomblé* phrases rather than an actual traditional *candomblé* song. [All these tracks can be heard at www.myspace.com/sundayalahari.]

On my newer project, *Invoking Aphrodite*, with the Greek Cypriot women, the cut "Ocean of Blessings" features a *tar* (larger frame drum without jingles), playing a traditional Nubian rhythm I learned from Hamza El Din, against the *berimbau* and *pandeiro* playing a version of the Brazilian rhythm *Maracatu* from the state of Pernambuco. We also used the Nubian hand-clapping pattern that goes with this *tar* rhythm. This is one of the first rhythms I learned from Hamza's song "Ollin Arageed" on his recording *Eclipse* (1978). [To hear Hamza play this rhythm: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SCB6Nil3eiE>.] *Invoking Aphrodite* features sacred music and poetry from ancient Greece fused with Mediterranean and Brazilian

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I find the Mediterranean world of today spawning a heady mix of fused rhythms drawn from the folk roots of southern Europe, the Middle East, North Africa, India, and the contemporary pop music from the U.S. and Europe. This is what inspires me most, for I am not a traditionalist committed to learning the classical music of another culture; I try to be a conduit for a rhythmic fusion of the different traditions I'm captivated and inspired by. And in that sense, I feel that I am truly a daughter of both Salvador—a city that has famously fused and rooted traditions from Africa, Europe, and the U.S.—and the fascinating rhythmic brew bubbling up out of the Mediterranean world.

I hope those of you coming to PASIC this year can join my participatory clinic in "Fusing Brazilian and Mediterranean Rhythmic Traditions for Middle Eastern Style Tambourine." We'll be working on these styles of drumming techniques and rhythmic structures that created the core of the music from these last two recording projects I did in Salvador. We'll have quite a few of my Remo signature series tambourines there for participants, but please bring a Middle Eastern style tambourine if you have one, and a Brazilian style agogo bell or wooden clavé would be handy also!

Layne Redmond is an acclaimed composer, percussionist, author, and clinician who has performed at the Touch Festival in Berlin; Seattle Bumbershoot Festival; Institute for Contemporary Art in London; Tambores do Mundo in San Luis, Brazil; the PercPan Festival in Salvador, Brazil; Vienna International Percussion Festival; with the Ma'Gaia ensemble in Cyprus; and at several PASICs. She's the author of *When the Drummers Were Women*; has a signature series of world percussion instruments with Remo, Inc.; and two of her recordings—*Invoking the Muse* and *Trance Union*—were voted

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