magazine of the philadelphia folklore project

Works IN PROGRESS

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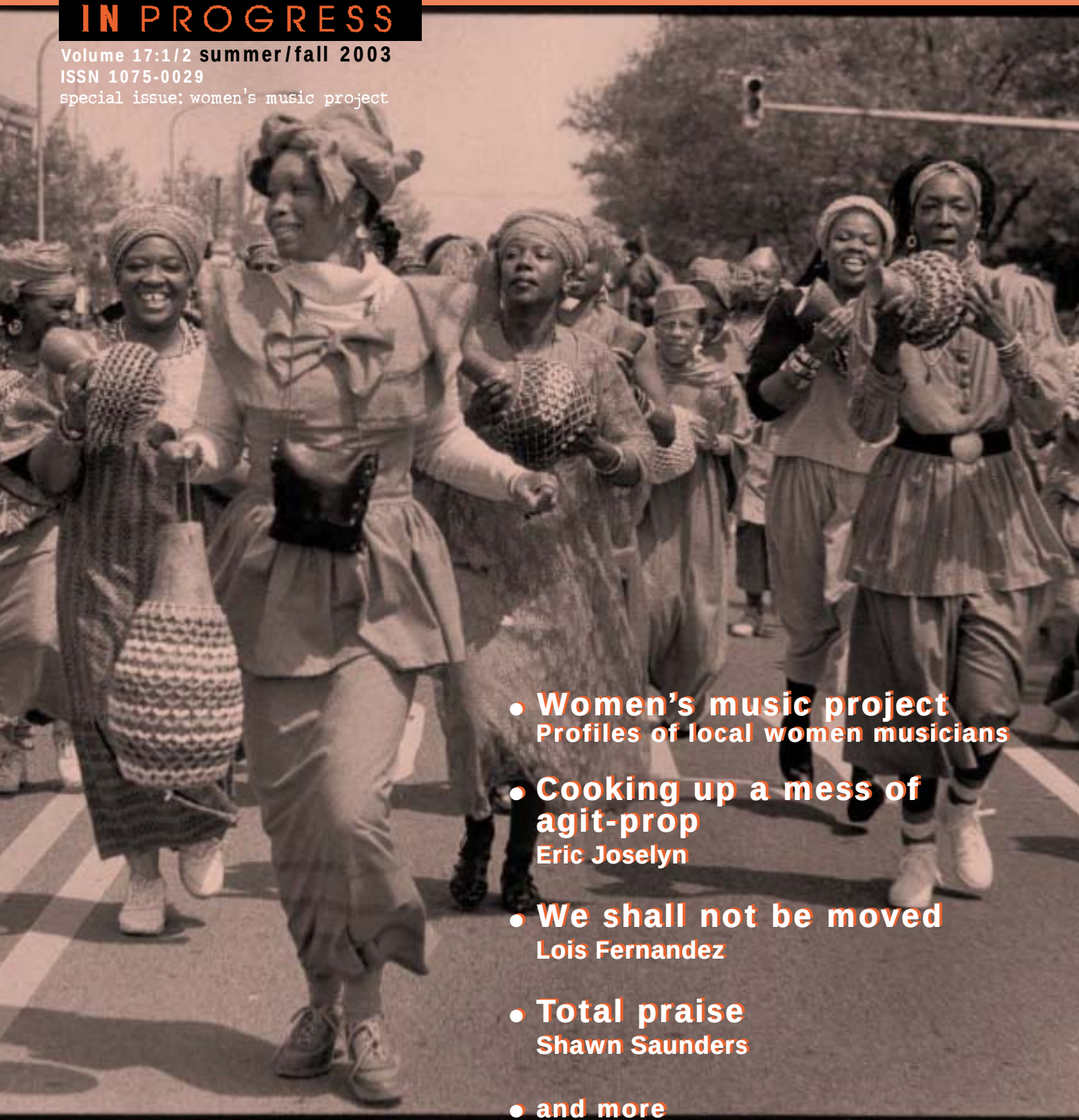

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  Profiles of local women musicians
- **Cooking up a mess of agit-prop**
  Eric Joselyn
- **We shall not be moved**
  Lois Fernandez
- **Total praise**
  Shawn Saunders
- **and more**

Works IN PROGRESS

Works in progress is the magazine of the Philadelphia Folklore Project, a 17-year-old urban folklife organization. We work with people and communities in the Philadelphia area to build critical folk cultural knowledge, respect the complex folk and traditional arts of our region, and challenge practices that diminish these local grassroots arts and humanities. To learn more, please visit our website at www.folkloreproject.org or call 215.468.7871

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thank you to all

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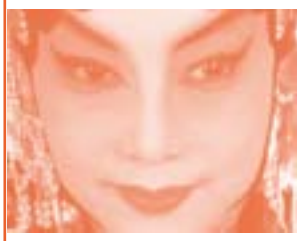

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Omomola Iyabunmi and the Women's Sekere Ensemble at Africamericas Festival. Photo: Thomas B. Morton

This began as a special issue about women and music, but the government's mad rush to war intervened. World events have been impossible to ignore, especially as so many artists among our circles have direct experience of the real costs of war and violence, at home and abroad. These past months PFP friends, staff, board, and artists engaged in various efforts to speak out against the war on Iraq. (See our anti-war resolution on our website). Now we offer this issue as a reminder that folk and traditional arts are long-time resources for struggle, as well as forceful evidences that there have been, and continue to be, other kinds of social arrangements than those in which we find ourselves here and now.

• • •

Some of the women's musical traditions described in these pages have served as explicit tools for naming and advancing peoples' political struggles. NANIKHA founder Nia Bey Al-Rasul pieced together the words of the "Nkosi Sikelei" in the early 1980s, determined to sing the South African national anthem so that others in the African American community could hear the song and understand the issues. The group NANIKHA comes out of an impulse to stand with others, and to sing and be heard.

This impulse—indeed, this *right* to a kind of meaningful freedom of expression— is not something that we all possess. Nor is it something that comes easily, for more reasons than there is space here to discuss. In most cases, the stories that follow chronicle ways that women have seized opportunities, dedicated themselves to learning, committed themselves to a version of community music-making, and culture-making, in which they are active participants. Sometimes, women are fortunate: recognized and named as artists by other artists of stature. On her very first trip to Africa, Nana Korantemaa heard her name called out by a venerable healer— a woman she had never met before. The experience was stunning and opened a spiritual and musical life path for Nana. The three young Latina musicians described here represent, similarly, new generations seeking ways to reclaim and reimagine what tradition and culture can offer.

Li Shuyuan comes from a long line of Beijing opera artists. This tradition did not guarantee that her life would be easy (although she says little of her own hardships.) She has much to say about how she has come to value the discipline and training that she gained from Beijing opera. She reminds us: there are no short cuts, in learning a traditional art or in life. Few other women profiled in these pages were, like Ms. Li, born into an artistic lineage that is clear and present for them.

This modest issue offers a small sampling of women's first-person accounts of how diverse (and often minority) artistic lineages have been sustained, threatened, and recovered in widely varied times and places. Here are reminders of how music can be more than a commodity, and far more than mere entertainment. For all of these women, music and art have been fundamental lifelines.

• • •

This issue is rounded out with two articles that remind us of ongoing struggles for equity and justice in Philadelphia. Lois Fernandez responds to speculators' plans to further gentrify an historically African American neighborhood. She asks, "What is affordable housing?" Assuredly not the $350,000 townhouses that are planned for her neighborhood, from which long-time residents are nearly totally displaced.

Folk arts have often served as vehicles for rendering community experience. The tendency is to imagine that community is a synonym for ethnicity, line of descent, or physical space. But many of us (including some of the women in this issue) have complex and mixed lines of descent, are long time dis-placed, but are united by our actions, our collective sense of outrage at inequity, and by our desire to build a community based on justice and equity. It is this vision of a fundamentally just society towards which artist and activist Eric Joselyn works. No less than any of the other folk art traditions profiled here, his is art in service of community. When thousands of people wearing his "No Stadium in Chinatown" t-shirts filled the streets in demonstrations against the city's plans a few years back, the vivid display amplified the message. And even more: the community could *see* itself, its power and its strength.

The folk art traditions described here have cultural equity, community survival, and rights of expression at their heart. That these issues are chronically overlooked and underestimated, often pushed aside by more "pressing" matters (as is often the case with "women's issues") should be no surprise. But in these times, we would do well to pay attention to the fate and state of both arts and people who (to borrow Eric's words) make available such useable, inclusionary, accessible, and significant alternatives.

— Debora Kodish

program

About the Women's Music Project

by toni shapiro-phim

Women's Music Project artists. Other page: Nana Korantemaa Ayeboafo, Leendavy Koung and Susan Watts. This page: Leendavy Koung. Photos: Thomas B. Morton, 2003

The Philadelphia Folklore Project's "Women's Music Project" is a first-time-ever initiative that will draw to a close this summer. For two years the Project has focused on the art and artistry of three accomplished local musicians: Leendavy Koung, Cambodian instumentalist and singer; Susan Watts, klezmer trumpeter and vocalist; and Nana Korantemaa Ayeboafo, who specializes in Akan percussion of Ghana. Each of these women counts herself and her music as part of multiple and often overlapping communities. It is these community connections, along with the specific artistic traditions and these particular practitioners, that the Women's Music Project has supported through grant development and programming.

The Women's Music Project has aimed, since its beginning in 2001, to give three musicians support for their creative work, a chance to preserve their musical traditions by developing youth ensembles, and a platform for presenting their art to the public. We started from the premise that each of these artists, being aware of her own role in maintaining a musical form with an important history and a fragile future, and having arrived at a critical juncture in that historical trajectory, would benefit from the individual, collaborative, and public aspects of such a project. We also looked at this as a program that would enrich Philadelphia's cultural community through public performances and through the development of youth ensembles in musical forms that are for the most part unknown or unrecognized by the local public.

Leendavy Koung plays a number of Cambodian musical instruments, including the khim (dulcimer), takhe (zither), roneat (xylophone), and others. She also performs different types of Cambodian traditional music—for weddings, folk and classical dance, ayaii (rhymed and improvised repartee singing), and folk and popular songs. She comes from an extraordinary musical family: surviving the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia (under whom close to a quarter of the population perished), she and her siblings carried the musical instruments her father had crafted (and taught them to play) through the jungles on a dangerous journey across Cambodia's border to refugee camps in Thailand. From there, they eventually made their way— instruments in hand— to Philadelphia. It is still somewhat uncommon for women to play certain of the instruments and kinds of music Leendavy does; nonetheless she has been performing since 1978, organizing youth programs since 1983, and coordinating arts education programs since 1993. Her communities extend from her South Philadelphia neighborhood where she has taught Cambodian dance and music to young people in schools and community sites for years, to the greater Philadelphia area in which she has performed and organized festivals in honor of major

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Cambodian holidays. She also maintains connections to her homeland, not only through a shared commitment with artists in Cambodia and around the world to preserving and developing Cambodian arts, but through relief work as well, associated, in particular, with a pediatric hospital.

Susan Watts represents the youngest generation of an important klezmer dynasty that reaches back to the Jewish Ukraine of the 19th century, beginning with her great-grandfather— bandleader, composer, and cornet-player Joseph Hoffman. Hoffman's handwritten music books contain his own arrangements of horas, Russian shers, polkas, mazurkas, Russian kamaratskies and kazatskies, a czardas, waltzes, freilachs, bulgars, and many other tunes named after the Russian and Polish towns with which the music was associated. The Hoffman family played for generations of Philadelphia-area Jewish weddings and parties, and their music became part of a distinctly Philadelphia klezmer repertoire. Susan is the sole living purveyor of the klezmer-style trumpet sounds that electrified Jewish American audiences for decades. She currently plays with her mother, the great klezmer drummer Elaine Hoffman Watts, in their Philadelphia-based group, the Twelve Tribes Yiddisheh Brass Band. Linked to klezmer communities the world over, Susan frequently performs (as a trumpeter and vocalist) with noted klezmer musicians in Europe and in the U.S.; she has recorded and performed with Hankus Netsky, Mikveh, London's Klezmer All-Star Brass Band, and others. She teaches at klezmer festivals and privately.

Nana Korantemaa Ayeboafo, founder (in 1975) of the Female Percussion Ensemble, here in Philadelphia, is a drummer, dancer, singer, and composer who specializes in the Akan musical traditions of Ghana. She spent seven years in Ghana, studying with accomplished drummers in the context of religious and healing practices. As an adolescent, Nana took formal lessons from artists in her North Philadelphia community who had studied with well-known drummers Baba Olatunji from Nigeria and Saka Acquaye from Ghana. Experiences as a dancer and drummer with the Arthur Hall Dance Ensemble deepened her knowledge of percussion. She has worked professionally with such respected African percussionists and dancers as Mongo Santamaria, Geoffrey Holder, Judith Jamison, Carmen de Lavalah, and Alhaji Bai Konte. A founder of the first Akan shrine here in Philadelphia, Nana underwent traditional rites in Ghana in January of 2001, receiving the title of High Priest, the highest honor any female may obtain within the Akan spiritual tradition. Her artistic and spiritual circles overlap, reaching from the street on which she lives to the Philadelphia African and African American drumming communities, to the religious world of the Akan here and in Ghana. Through her organization, Star Spirit, which she founded, she has coordinated the building of a clinic in Ghana. In addition to performing in musical ensembles and as a soloist, and to participating in ceremonial events, she teaches drumming and accompanies dance troupes in the Philadelphia area.

Nana's classes in Akan

Photos of Susan Watts and Nana Korantemaa Ayeboafo: Thomas B. Morton, 2003

percussion are held in her home in North Philadelphia. Most of her 10 students walk to the classes, or are accompanied by a parent. Several of the parents stay for the lessons, and are learning drumming alongside the youth. Leendavy's Cambodian music classes are held at her parents' home in South Philadelphia (where the instruments her father made are housed), walking distance from the homes of all of her students. Susan Watts teaches Jewish klezmer music in her Havertown home. Some of the women's students were featured, along with their teachers, in a June concert.

Nana's students have already performed publicly. Our first public Women's Music Project event involved Nana and her students performing as part of their neighborhood's annual July 4th block party, when the block committee arranges to have the street free from traffic, and community members celebrate together. Nana and her students played a traditional drum prelude (in a 6/8 rhythm) and a rhumba to the cheers of about 75 of their neighbors.

Susan Watts and friends played at the 2002 Philadelphia Fringe Festival, for which she designed a program based on family stories. Nana's percussion composition was played as part of an "outdooring" ceremony held in Fairmount Park to acknowledge her status as Akan High Priest. And Leendavy performed at a recital in the Southwark School, where the Folklore Project holds Cambodian dance and painting residencies for students.

This past March, the Philadelphia Folklore Project featured these women at a concert in honor of Women's History Month. One audience member wrote in her evaluation of the program that she appreciated both the diversity of the music presented and "the intertwining of the cultures," which she saw as "separate and yet somehow leaning on each other. A familiar melody; a similar phrase; a drum beat." Even though each musical tradition (Cambodian, Jewish, Ghanaian) was performed as part of a discrete set by the individual artists and their ensembles, the concert brought out resonances that cut across the cultural divides. Their music spoke to the celebration of accomplished women, to the power of artistic lineages, and to the desire for peace. Our concert took place during the first weeks of war in Iraq. Several people on stage had immigrated to the U.S. because of wars in their homelands. And others have relatives serving in the military in the Middle East. It was our wish to offer people a joyous afternoon of glorious music as comfort in a time of uncertainty and concern, as a way of opening (and continuing) dialogues, and as sheer fun.

The Women's Music Project has harnessed the energy, creativity, and artistry of three exceptional women in public programs that we hope have pushed audiences to think critically and sensitively about women and cultural expression, about community, and about humanity. The women themselves, individually and collectively, through their music

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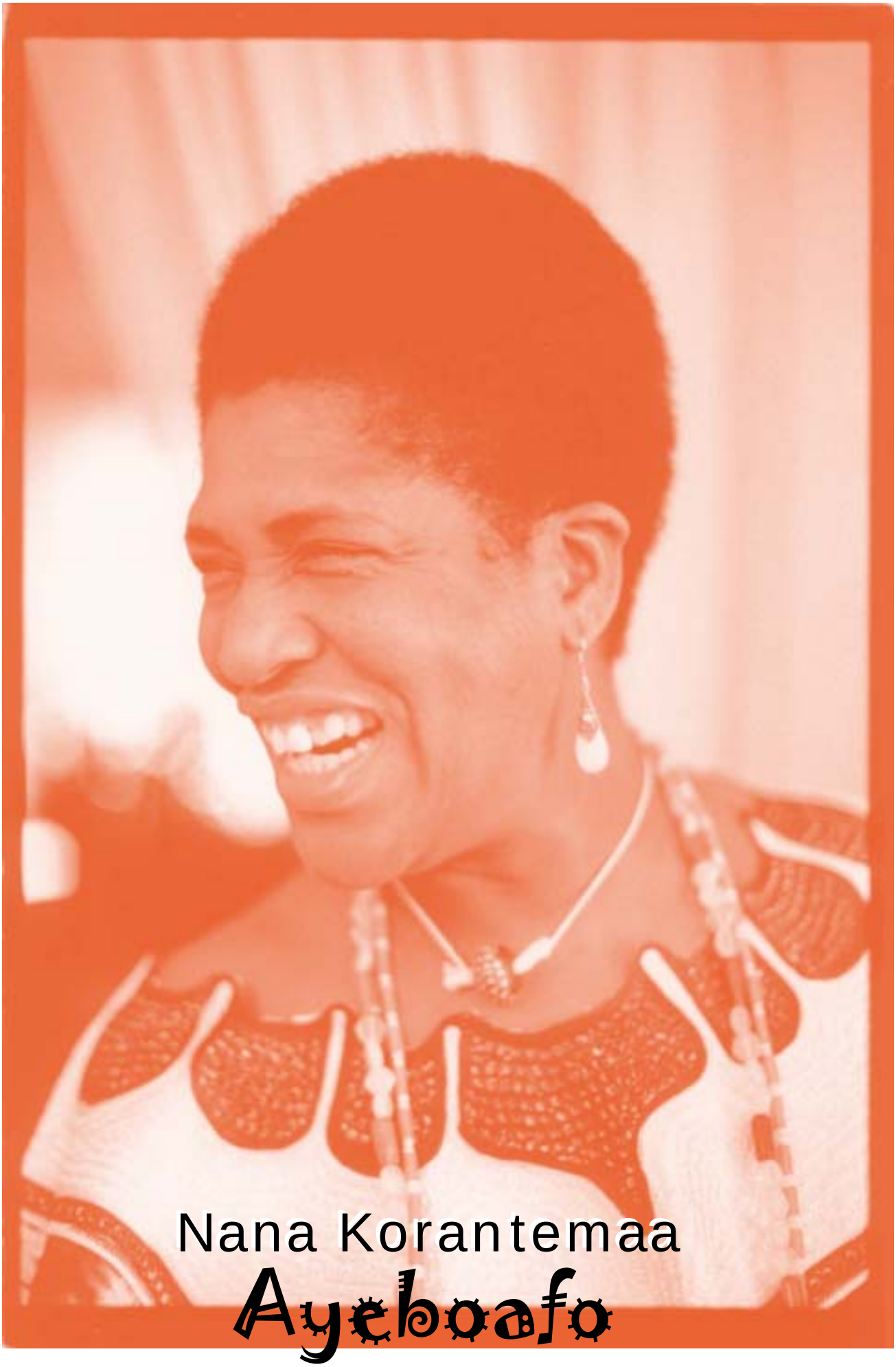

Nana Korantemaa Ayeboafo

The drum was my introduction to my life

from an interview recorded, transcribed and edited by Elizabeth Sayre

Nana Korantemaa Ayeboafo was the first daughter in a family of nine. Born in Philadelphia in 1951, she grew up "being a ruffian— always hanging out with boys, and doing things that boys do, like playing sports, and climbing fences, and playing drums." As a child, Nana asked for music lessons, but her mother functioned as a single parent and there was no money except for the bare necessities. Nana used big oatmeal boxes and Crisco cans, making drums out of anything in the house that made sound. In the summer of 1968, she happened to discover a master drummer from Ghana, John Eshun, playing music in her neighborhood, there because he was working with performer Arthur Hall. Nana was electrified by what she heard, and began to sit in to listen to rehearsals. Eventually, she found her way to the dance classes at Arthur Hall's Ile Ife Center. The women there took her under their wings. Evangeline Brown was her first dance teacher. Carol Butcher, another member of Hall's company, began to teach her African songs. She was invited to go along with Hall's company as a singer on a concert tour. It was an "enriching and empowering experience" for her. The place became a second home, and she was hungry to soak up everything. She was dancing, but she was always hanging around the drummers. She credits Robert Artis for taking her on as a student. She describes what happened in her own words.

Nana Korantemaa Ayeboafo, 2003. Photo: Thomas B. Morton

I was dancing, and after the dance class the musicians, Farel Johnson, Robert Artis, George Cannon, James Corry, and Joseph Williams, would still be drumming and working out different things without the dancers. I would always still be there. So, Bobby Artis said to me, "What, you want to play? I was like, "Yeah." He said, "You serious?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "Sit down, then." So he's the one that was responsible for me playing. And he would say, "All right, I want to hear a 6/8." After I learned cabildo, I had to go from 6/8 to 4/4 and back. He was the one that really helped me with my timing. He was the lead drummer of the company.

Some of the other musicians worked with Ghanaian drummer Saka Acquaye, like Baba Crowder and Sonny Morgan. Bobby Artis used to talk about all of these

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Nana Korantemaa Ayeboafo Photo: Thomas B. Morton

He said that you play your experience. It's not so much about the patterns, but you play your experience and when you play your experience, then you can really put yourself into it.

people. Bobby Crowder had his own company, you know. They said he was very strict with his musicians. In fact, they said, if I was in Bobby's company I never would have been able to play drums, because they wouldn't let women play drums. So, Bobby Artis used to say to me, "That's why you have to be good. Because when they come around, I'm going to say, 'Yeah, that's my drummer, and so what?'" Bobby Artis is the person responsible for my really knowing about African rhythms.

I started on congas. Cabildo is the first rhythm that I learned how to play, but I had to play it on the bell first, while Bobby played it on the drum. He's the one who would say, "Drumming is not physical. It's a spiritual thing. You have to have your mind together. And you have to concentrate, and you have to practice. It's not about showboating. It's not a commercial thing, where you go out there and play on stuff, to let people know, 'Oh, yeah, I know rhythms.' It's not about that, so forget that. I don't want to hear you banging on stuff anymore. If you're gonna play, you sit down and be serious, OK? And a drummer's supposed to play every day. If you don't play everyday, you're mediocre." That's how he was. But he really loved drumming, and he just wanted you to play well. He always said, "If you're going to play, you must put your heart into what you play. And once you learn the rhythms, that's just the beginning. You have to have your tones. What's your tone quality like? It has to have definition. An open tone has to be an open tone every time you hit the drum, not some of the time."

He then showed me the different styles of drumming, Haitian drumming, and what you hear in Ghana, and how you approach the djembe as opposed to the congas. Bobby Artis didn't want me to play the maman drum, the lead drum in Haitian vodou. He said, "If a lot of men are sitting down playing drums, you don't play the maman. You let them play the bottom and you play something else. You don't always have to drum. If you're gonna play the bell, play it, really play it. And keep the time. Each instrument is equally important. Don't feel that you have to play a drum. Play a bell, just be in the battery. And that's good." Also, he said that you play your experience. It's not so much about the patterns, but you play your experience, and when you play your experience, then you can really put yourself into it. It is important for drummers to play for dancers. He said, "If you're playing for yourself, that's one thing, but as soon as you start playing for dancers, there's a whole other concept that you must have. This is the only real marriage in the world." He said the only real marriage was the one

between the drum and the dance. Bobby Artis, he was great. A really, really, great drummer.

The drum was my introduction to my life, really. Because I didn't know who I was. I was floating, not really knowing what I was going to do, where I was going. I had the kind of threats that a child in this kind of community probably has from her mother. "You're not going to do all that. You're going to have to do something meaningful in your life." But what? I just knew I didn't want to have a thousand kids. I didn't want that. And seeing this guy jumping up and down with a drum between his legs, and these people singing in another language, with tights and stuff on. I didn't even know what tights were! My first time to Baum's to buy tights and leotards—I mean, that was an awakening. You know what I mean, because what did we have? From a very poor family in the neighborhood, what do you know about a dance supply store? And modern dance shoes—I'm wearing modern, I got ballet shoes, I got tap shoes! It was like my life just took a whole other turn. I went from this meager little pea, to this… I'm on concert stages all over the country. You know what I mean? C'mon! Then we were on TV, and we're at Lincoln Center, and Kennedy Center, and you're at all of these places, and people stand up and give you a standing ovation. I'm standing on stage in this pose going, "OK, God, what's this really all about?" And the intensity that the drummers and dancers brought to those concerts was phenomenal. It was just transforming. So the drum really gave me life, a life that I just couldn't imagine, and this is before Africa.

Back then I had all of Celia Cruz's records. I mean, after I got out of the tour, I had all of Celia Cruz's records, I had all the orishas, singing songs to the orishas. Then I got initiated in Francisco "Pancho" Mora's house. Carol Butcher took me there. "Pancho" Mora was one of the babalawos responsible for bringing the Lucumí religion from Cuba. He's dead now.

What I learned in Ghana about women drummers was quite to the contrary of what I heard before I went. People in Ghana said, "…if you are there at the drum, you're supposed to be there."

Once I went to Africa, that just changed and took me on another trip. But before that, I was happy to let my father's Mayan or Latino face show. My Mom used to joke and say, "Well, she's part red person." Anyway, so, my playing congas and singing Spanish songs, it was like I could let that out, I could rejoice with that part of myself, because I really felt it. The drummers were saying I was getting good. They said, "You play well." People used to call me Shango. Or, they would say, "You must be Shango." So I went and found all this information about Shango. I bought a big medallion of Shango. I had a Shango bracelet, I had a Shango anklet, I had gold earrings—I was Shango! I wore all this red, it was crazy, because I was Shango, c'mon! They said if I was a lady drummer, I had to be Shango, so you know, Shango was my orisha and that was it, I was Shango! Can't you see I'm Shango? I went all the way. And so, Carol took me to her padrino's house where she was already initiated,

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Nia Bey Al-Rasul, Nadirah Barba, Anita Barnes Cauthorn and Taliah Munir-Diouf

artist profile

NANIKHA: this is not a dress rehearsal

Above: NANIKHA at Africamericas Festival. Right: Nia Bey Al-Rasul. Photos: Thomas B. Morton

NANIKHA is a 21-year-old musical ensemble of four African American women. Other things have come and gone in the lives of Nia Bey Al-Rasul, Nadirah Barba, Anita Barnes Cauthorn, and Taliah Munir-Diouf, but after decades together, these women are thoughtful and articulate about why the group has lasted and what it means. NANIKHA is an acronym that represents the names of the original members. From the very beginning, the group's singing was political, spiritual, and sustaining. Motivated by a clear sense of the power of their own voices, a commitment to one another, a love for song, and an awareness of something bigger than themselves, NANIKHA members reflect in the excerpts that follow about the place of music (and sisterhood) in their lives.

Nia Bey Al-Rasul: How did we get started? We went to hear Sweet Honey in the Rock at Temple University, probably about 1978, and the music was so good and so inspiring, and in their singing they spoke to present-day issues. At that time they might have been doing songs like "Stephen Biko" and "Seven Day Kiss." When they finished, our ears were just full of their sound, and we were like, "Where are they from? And they're going back to Washington? They're leaving us and we're not going to hear them sing whenever we want? I don't think it is even fair! Oh, we just need to hear more of this!" A friend of mine was walking behind me, Brother Komi Sankofa, and he put a big hand on my shoulder and looked me right in my face and said, "That's right, Mama Nia." It was like, somebody put something on me. That's what the feeling was. I can still feel his hand coming down on my shoulder. I thought, "Why is he saying that to me? I can't do no Sweet Honey in the Rock!" We all left the Temple hall with the Sweet Honey sound in our ears.

Four or more years passed and the whole community was rallying around the apartheid issue. Brother Godfrey Sithole and others were dealing with the responsibility of keeping the community informed about apartheid. We did whatever was necessary-rallies and meetings, and at one of the meetings they were selling an album called "Liberation." I still have the album, and it had the song "Nkosi Sikeleli Afrika." I became curious about the song. The album came with a booklet, and it also had the English translation. I started reading the words because I had some knowledge of Ki-Swahili vowel sounds.

Every morning, I was used to getting up around five o'clock to do my household chores. I lived in the Wilson Park projects. So, I would open up my front door. I would put on this album, and I really liked it. "Well, what is this about?" I started reading, and "Oh, wow, this is a prayer!" So I wondered if I could learn how to sing it, and I started piecing out what it meant. I would go to the book- "So this is what they are saying!" I would say, "That's clear." Eventually I was able to listen to it and read and sing until I was able to sing the whole song.

Then I wanted to sing the Nkosi. But where could I sing? At this time, I worked at African Cultural Arts Forum, ACAF—my whole history is there. I was singing this song for Rashie Abdul-Samad there, and he said, "Nia,

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NANIKHA from the "early days," at a March on Washington, and in an early performance photo. Photos used with permission.

there are more than enough places to sing." I was doing lappa and gele demonstrations for ACAF, and I knew a lot of different places from vending. I said, "Rashie is right. I'll learn the song and then I'll figure out where I can sing it."

The first time I sang "Nkosi" was at a community center at 25th and Lehigh, a place where we had all different types of affairs and meetings. I was telling one of the brothers there that I had learned the South African national anthem and I wanted to sing it, to open one of their programs. An opportunity presented itself and I sang. I did not sing publicly before that, but I had no fear because I was used to being in front of audiences doing demonstrations.

I became close to this song because politically I understood that there were many of us who wanted to do something. We had no money: the most we could do was rally and make everybody in the community conscious. We could not pack up and go to South Africa. The one thing that occurred to me is that we could make a joyful noise unto the Lord. I thought, "We have to sing the 'Nkosi' and we have to continue to sing it until apartheid ends." So that is how it actually began.

And that was the first song for NANIKHA. I took the song to Khandi because I was excited about being able to sing it in the language. The English didn't come until later. But to sing it in the language was the most important thing to do. And Khandi said, "That is really a pretty song." So she invited me over to her house. "Teach me," she said. Sometimes I couldn't go over to her house and we would do it over the phone because we both had children. By any means necessary! The telephone—you could just use it. And then she began to harmonize the song with me. Then further on down the line, our children were at the same school, and Nadirah's son became a student there. After school, we would get together and sing a few bars, and Nadirah asked what we were doing. She was like, "Oh, yeah?" And I was like, "Yeah!" And we knew Nadirah sang, and she would listen to us, and eventually she began to harmonize. And I was like, "Look y'all, we can do this at different places."

We all supported the community's political needs: the whole Mumia situation, the vendors' situation, the schools' situation, and just anything that came about that was occuring in the community to make our lives better, to make our community's lives better. We functioned within the whole Nguzo Sabo, within the Black value system. I worked as a community worker. And I was involved as a young parent. And my mother also worked with Roxanne Jones in the beginning of organizing welfare rights. So we were able to bring a lot of things to the community and to gain a lot of self-empowerment. And the music fit right into that.

Because we had started this singing relationship, Nadirah and Khandi and I began to come and meet at each other's houses. Nadirah had a car, so she would pick us up. At Khandi's house we decided to organize ourselves and to organize into a singing ensemble. We were sisters coming from different denominations, and we said that we should be able to express ourselves through song. We would only sing message music. We decided that we were going to do it a cappella because it was the first form and that way we wouldn't have to worry about getting musicians.

We only had three songs and

we were asked to come to Delaware to sing the "Nkosi." The photographer who took our picture there really did us a favor. Hence the history and documentation of NANIKHA began.

There were three of us now, and I was still dealing with the Sweet Honey sound. We realized that we did not have that really high voice. Anita was singing, and Nadirah and Khandi and I heard her. So we listened to her and I said, "That's the voice up there on the stage." So that's how we found Anita. Unfortunately, Khandi left Philadelphia about five years into NANIKHA. We had to give her up, which was not easy. But she did leave us with the art of sekere playing and she helped us to develop our tongues for singing songs in African languages.

We've been together for 21 years. And we were mothers. We took our children to all of our performances. If we couldn't take our children, then we didn't go. We weren't equipped for babysitters, so if we went to a performance, our children would sit in the front row and maybe once or twice, we would say to the audience, "Give us a moment." And we gained a reputation for disciplining our children from the stage. The community was very helpful to us, because they found humor in it, and I think they respected us. Our children were always with us, and they knew all the songs, and we never had to worry real hard about a babysitter, which took some of the stress out of it.

In the beginning, we wanted women to understand that if you set your mind to doing something, with organization and unity you can get it done. Longevity is one of the things that we planned for from the start.

Anita Barnes Cauthorn: I was singing jazz with a band, and we were rehearsing for a program at Harambee Institute. Nia heard me and she came over and said, "We need to add that voice." So they felt they needed me to do a part.

NANIKHA has been the completion for me for the last 18 years— to be able to do my cultural music and to combine that with my religion has been a real joy. I sing jazz. I also sing with the church choir at Vine Memorial where I am a soloist.

On my own I've developed a presentation, "Brown Songbirds," which is a musical historical review of African American female jazz and blues singers from the early 1900s up to the 1940s. I have about a dozen women that I feature, such as Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, Billie Holiday and others. I lecture about these women, their contributions to African American music, and their unity with each other. My best friend Barbara Whiteman got me started. She was collecting African American dolls, and I said, "I wish I had something to collect." Barbara said, "Well, you sing. Collect music. Do you know why Marian Anderson sang at the Lincoln Memorial? Find out why!" So Barbara inspired me. And at that time the main library had a music room with turntables, and I would go in and listen to albums and read the back covers, and learn the history of these women. I primarily started "Brown Songbirds" in 1985 for my children. I just wanted them to have some history about their music.

I think people really need to know that there is a continuous circle of our music. All of our music starts with our African history. The music is continuous. Young people think they are doing something new, but there is nothing new. It has changed, but it all circles around. I think it is really important that we teach this through the music.

I have been singing since I was five years old and music has been a lifesaver. I look at my life, and music has always been a high for me. Whatever it was—if I was angry, upset, or depressed, I would just sing to make myself feel better. The work I do professionally is emotionally draining. Without the music, I would probably have burned out by now. For me, it has been the therapist. When I went back to school, I didn't sing, and I literally felt empty, and I told myself I would never do that again. I make sure I have my Tuesday nights for choir rehearsal and Friday nights for NANIKHA.

I don't think you can do any kind of healing without your culture and spirituality. I think they are the two most important aspects that people need in their lives, to grow. If you can grab onto your own individual culture and the arts included, it can be an anchor for you. I teach that and preach that to women that I counsel, and I live that. I know that I couldn't have survived

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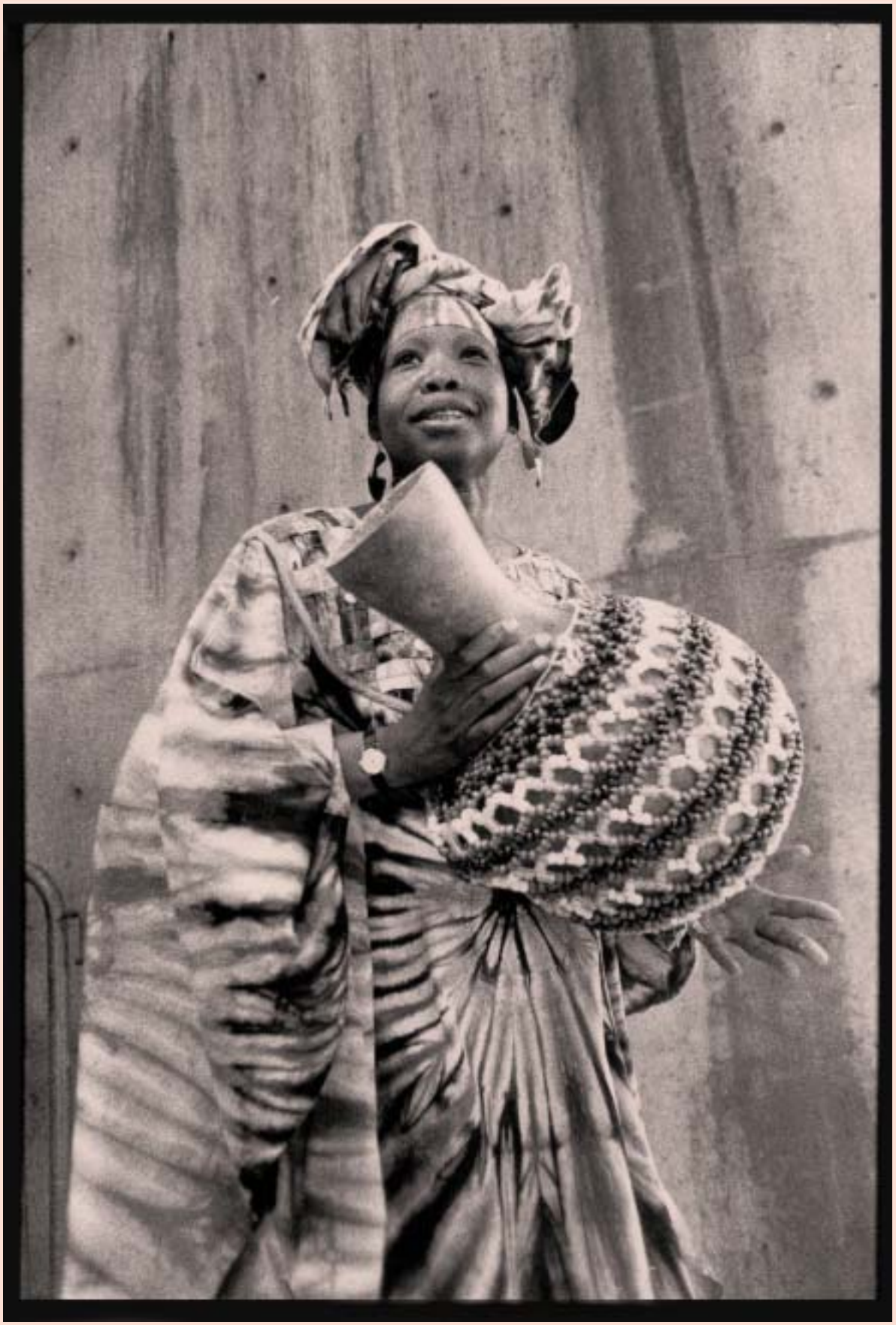

omomola iyabunmi

knocking on the spirit door

I didn't have any idea that I would be playing any instrument! I was guided towards the music, and when I saw the sekere, I fell in love with it. It was in the 70s and it was about regaining your culture. I was happy to embrace my own. I was happy to regain my tradition. I just fell in love with it. When I learned how to play the sekere, then I realized how deep the music was, how it made me feel, and I realized I had to learn more. I had go deeper. It came to me and then I embraced it.

Playing the sekere has taken me to so many places, it's really something. I started when I was in my early twenties. My first experience with the sekere was while visiting Harlem, New York, in 1969. I went to stay with a friend who gave me a tour of the city. Somehow, we got to 119th and 7th Avenue at the Yoruba Marketplace, and we stopped at a window that had men and women wearing African clothing. It was the Yoruba Temple. So I was excited— it was the sixties and we were coming into the knowledge of ourselves as Africans. I went inside, talked with people, and they invited me back to attend a service. It was there that I heard a woman and man play the sekere. I fell in love with the instrument and the religion. I found an ethnic group to identify with—the Yoruba people of Nigeria. I'm a feeling person. The Yoruba community felt right. The music took me into the music of my people; it was a whole other experience: learning the significance of the music, where the music can take you when you play, the things that you get in touch with when you play. When you play religious music, you're knocking on the spirit door intentionally, making things move with the music.

It's hard to express— when something has been taken from you, just what it feels like ...

When I was living in New York City, I met a man named Leonard Gibbs, a friend of a friend of mine, and a musician from Philadelphia. We were talking about the music and the Yoruba tradition. When I came back to Philadelphia, I looked him up. He was my first teacher. He played with a lot of people; they called him Doc Gibbs. Then I met Bobby Crowder. His group is Kulu Mele. I told him I wanted to go further in my studies. I began studies with Bobby Crowder. I still played wih Gibbs, but his schedule got busy. At the same time, Baba Ishangi Razak, was giving classes at Arthur Hall, so I started studying there with him. He had an Institute of African Science in New York, which dealt with history, philosophy, religion, art, dance, herbology, and music. I studied with him for some years, going back and forth to New York. At the same time, I continued to work with Kulu Mele, and I played with them for some years. Bobby Crowder would give me lessons on the side, as would Peache Jarman. We'd practice together. I was developing. You play with whoever you can so you can develop.

I was asked by Kofi Asante to participate in the Africamericas Festival and train 15 women to play sekere. Actually, I trained 10 women to participate in the parade. After the parade was over, there were different events going on and one man asked if we did other types of functions. He asked us to come to Atlantic City and play for a festival I went back and picked out five women who were strong players. I developed a program and that was our first gig. Currently, The Women's Sekere Ensemble is four women including myself. We get most of our bookings by word of mouth. We do a gig, someone sees us and asks for our card.

Over all these years, there has been a resurgence of African identity and pride in the African American community—we've been able to find and rebuild our culture. As a result, a lot of weddings are done traditionally now, and we serve our community by performing at these ceremonies. We also play at rites of passage ceremonies, which celebrate the transition from one stage of life to another. I'm so happy to be a part of that, getting our stuff back.

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Opposite page: Omomola Iyabunmi. Photo: Thomas B. Morton

Cooking up a mess of agit-prop

by eric joselyn

Holding conversations with social forces is what I figure artists/cultural workers should be about. Once you find yourself asking,"Where are we going and why are we in this handbasket?" there isn't much choice but to get busy, talking with people and taking part in the movements and struggles that seek to fundamentally reorder this society. Hey, alienation is this society's middle name. Their art and propaganda serve to bolster their rule. I'd like mine to undermine it.

As an artist I've watched pert near every sphere of cultural activity get commodified for profit and saturated with the dominant ideology. Most all the citizenry has been iced out of meaningful forms of cultural participation, while dollars and creative energy are monopolized for creating truly spectacular beer videos and music commercials.

With all this and more stuck in my craw, I've tried to counter this sorry state in some different ways:

- making propaganda that bolsters the struggles that can overturn the social order that created this stinking situation in the first place
- pursuing inclusionary or participatory artistic practice to counter a narrow "who should do art" doctrine
- making art that is cheap and/or free, useable, and accessible

In trying to relate myself and my work to peoples and struggles, I at times make art straight up "about" issues, but what stokes me up is to make artifacts that fit the hands of our movements. More good looking stuff for our side!

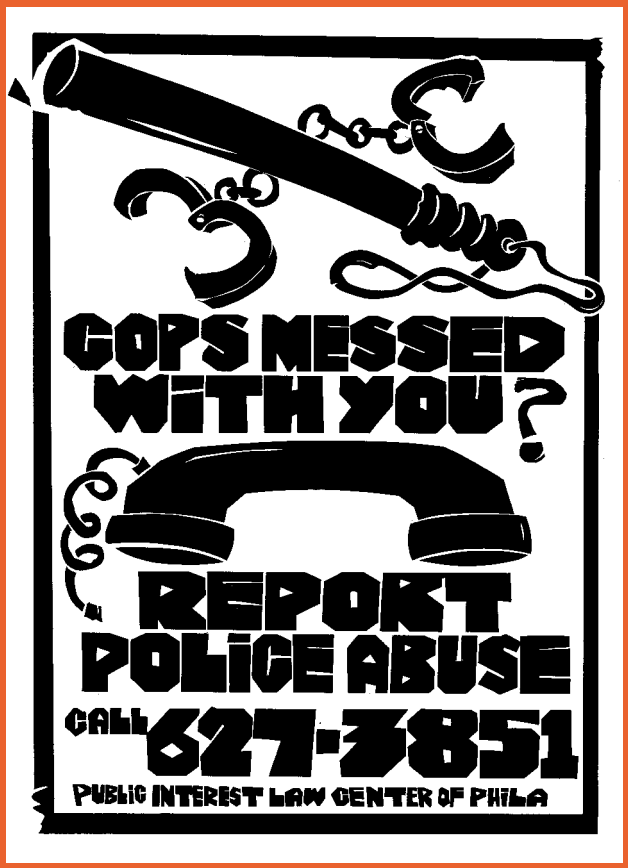
You'll not find me saying this is a small feat or that I've got it figured out, but that's the thinking that's led to sharing these selected works and words.

Why xerox-ready art?

I truly love making crafty-object stuff but I can't help but compare the circulation figures for U.S. Today vs. the dozen-plus beds covered with my quilts. The one artist-one product-one consumer equation is just too tight a cycle. So I've set about creating and distributing ready-to-copy sets of prints and reprintable images for just about anyone in motion, oh-so-easy images with words for reproduction and distribution.

Sometimes sets are solicited by folks I know who are involved in organizing. Other times I cook up and ship out items without a prompt.

In 1993, the U.S. was gearing up for Gulf War I — defense of fiefdom and da-monarchy. Organizing was pretty tough and our scattered movements had weak analysis, no NLF to root for, and precious few good looking graphics! In a frustrated frenzy, I cranked out a set of handbills and such and started mailing them out. The war and the sanctions went on, but my work was well received and was put to real use by people struggling stateside. Local organizations, little left papers, national liberal press, even two different papers in Johannesburg ran some of my stuff. It felt like a real contribution—a direct, functional art seen by more than just the folks at our local rallies. This led me to a larger-scale project in response to the Columbus/European invasion of the Americas. Later, I produced a graphic pack in the aftermath of the L.A. Rebellion, Clinton's macho bombing of Sudan, Afghanistan, and Iraq, as well as the latest imperialist blood stomp on the desert.



Opposite page: Choice t-shirt and placard design, reprinted over thousands of times: an attempt to cast the debate in broader terms.

This page, above: Placards to aid dry-wall workers in San Diego seeking to win union recognition. Below: Safe bet bad cops'll keep me in business for awhile. All images used with artist's permission.

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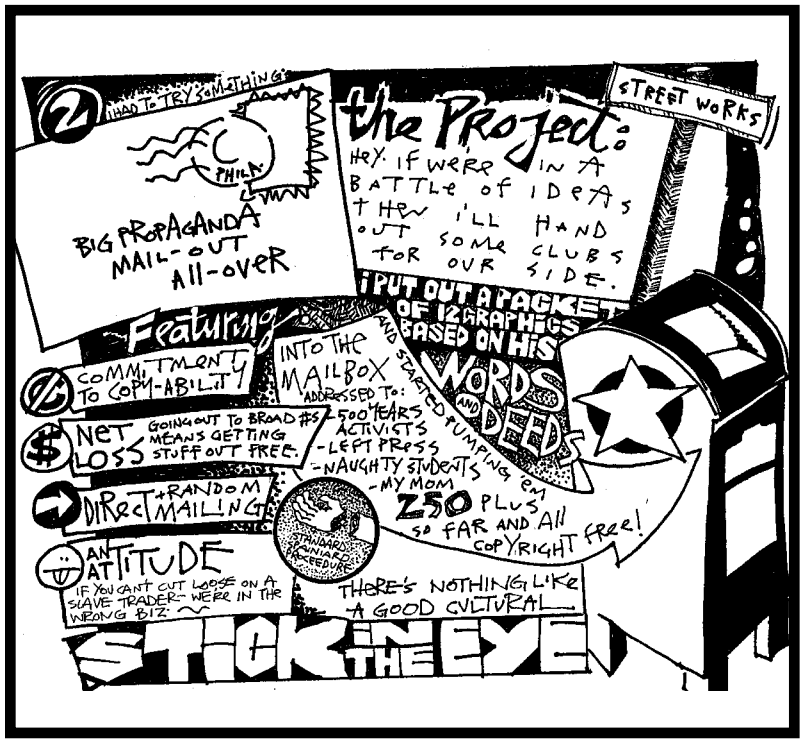

Show time

I've had opportunities to plan and/or participate in a whole mess of different street theater and/or political pageants designed to poke a stick in the eye of the rulers.

Most always these events are scruffy, held together by shoelaces and duct-tape. I confess a proclivity for cute motifs (dancing pizza slices) or a nice populist spoof (Green Backs and Spam), but this cultural work crosses over easily from propaganda to becoming a club to beat on the heads of our adversaries. Poeple have long suffered under evil leaders, but they aren't as willing to endure the rule of those held in ridicule. That's where goofy costumes come into play.

There's a lot for me to love about political spectacle: a collective process, shoddy costumes, cardboard props held together with string, crass appropriations of cereal jingles. All this is right up my aesthetic alley and I think it works—we can elbow our way in between near-ubiquitous ads and the state-sponsored quietude.

I figure what we need is a lot more of us strapping giant maps of Iraq to our heads and creating a public space with something to say.

Why I teach

I figure art can be a tool in the hands of youth, and, gosh, they sure could use some tools about now!

Kommercial Kulture 4 Kids is so sick and empty and the social reality in the city so grim that we'll end up mired in depression unless we're willing to see them an untrained army or unrehearsed chorus. The young take to just about any outlet of expression or channel for meaningful participation.

My best experiences are projects designed to engage people of all art "skill" levels in a process of social critique.

I spent many summers working with teens on a non-violence mural project. Ya know, most of the good stuff said about doing murals with youth is true: they're big, they promote group process and cooperation, the people like 'em, and they represent physical transformation of community space. Just about anything that gives kids a voice and helps them process the crap dropped on them every day is a positive step but the challenge of turning these first steps into real social power remains.

1993

Opposite page: A "work report" on my counter-Columbus work.

This page: Kind of like some real and bloody Star Warz, this Iraq attack has been run in a trilogy: Bush the First and Gulf War I, Slow death sanctions (with Clinton chucking cruise missles at Baghdad), and our latest blood stomp. Efforts from 1993, 1998 and 2003.

5 small images: Mini-placards we put together when University of Pennsylvania put a weapons design center in the heart of campus.

1998

been there, still doing that 2003

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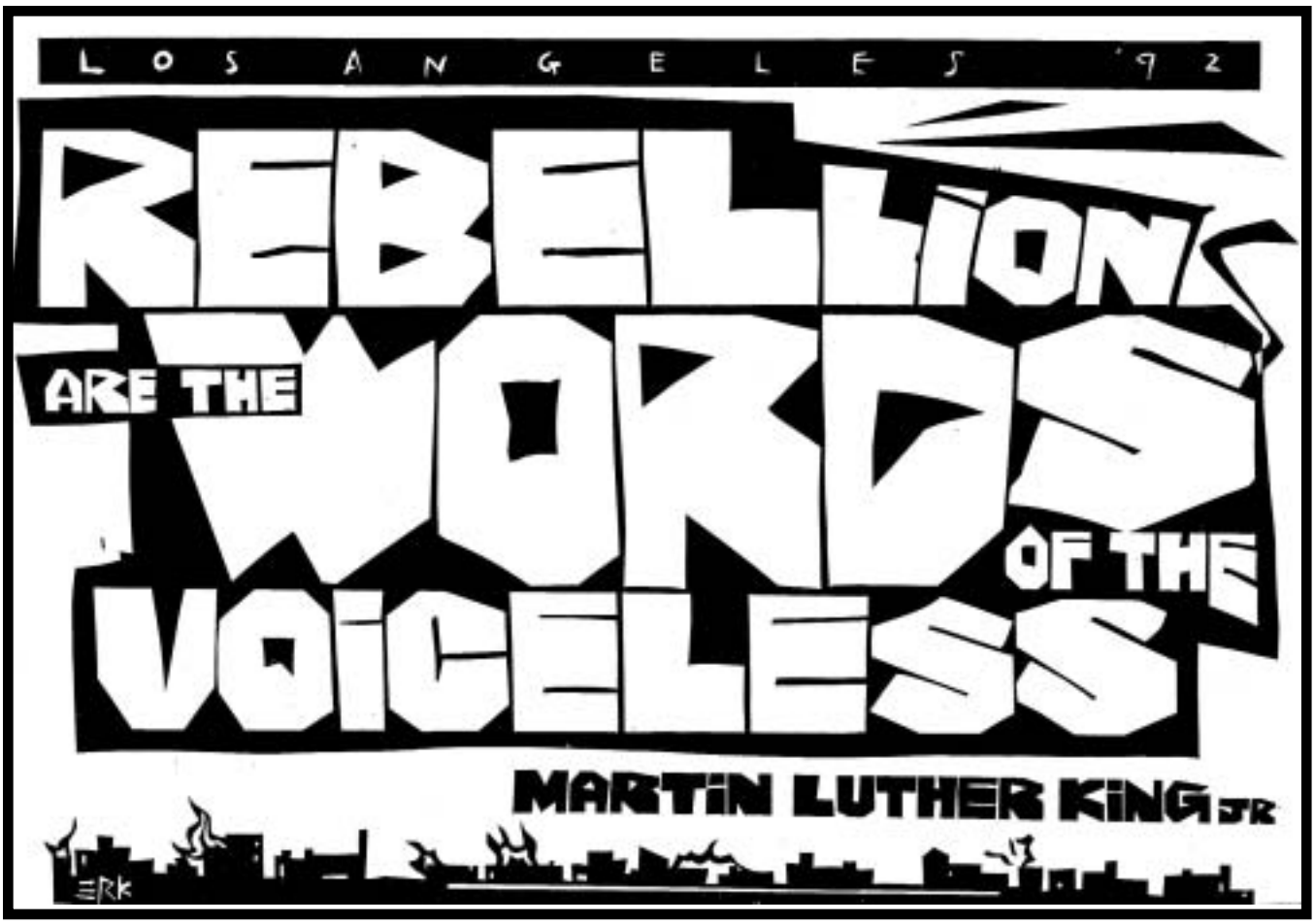
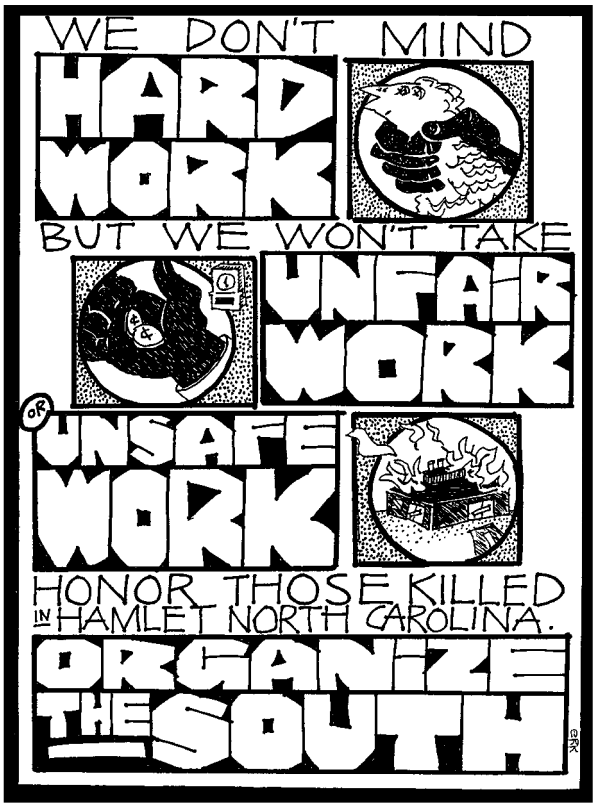


I live and teach art in Olney.

I've lived in the declining (declined) industrial center of Philadelphia for the past 16 years. The arc of my political work in PA stretches from curbsides to campus to communities to class-rooms and to lamp posts.

My life is not dedicated to perfecting my art but to turning this society over. I've pulled this stuff together in the hope of giving others encouragement and ideas for developing and deploying propaganda with effect.



This page, photos of the artist's work in action:
"Ban everyone from the military:" The Queer Liberation movements of the late 1980s and into the 90s set a new standard for dynamic and creative action that made many of us want to contribute.
"Toxins R Us:" When the university decided to take big Department of Defense dollars to build a research plant, it was time for jump-suited technicians to cart fuming carts laden with toxins to help illustrate the future.
"No racism. Stop Anti-Asian violence:" Why not give our ideas the force of law.

These street signs were posted throughout West Philadelphia, and for a while, motorists had some rules they could use.
Next page: Los Angeles 1992: Seemed some kind of analysis might be helpful in the swamp of TV-Mega-News Company coverage. Hamlet, North Carolina: When money greed took four peoples' lives, their co-workers toured the north in an organizing drive. I offered up a whole set of ads, t-shirts, buttons and posters.

李淑君 周秋

Li Shuyuan:

Walking on solid ground

When you learn Beijing Opera, you learn how to "walk on solid ground." You don't take shortcuts. You're down to earth. As a person you need to do things step by step-one step makes one footprint. You cannot just always think of taking short cuts or finding an easy way. Art is a real thing. It takes work and commitment.

To learn opera, you have to be able to endure hardship, to "eat bitterness." You must be diligent, work hard, and have endurance. It's not like you just finish going to class and that's it! You have to continue to work, study, and practice. You have to have self-discipline. A teacher can teach you, but if you want to become a successful performer, success depends on your self-motivation.

So this applies to real life. Especially for raising children. You cannot let them take short cuts. The easy way is not the right way. It's like building a foundation. If your foundation isn't any good, you cannot make a good building. And if you don't have a foundation in opera, there are a very limited number of things you can do when you perform.

In the Beijing opera community, my family is considered to be "Li Yuan Shi Jia," opera artists going back many generations, descended from performers of the Ming Dynasty. Many, many, members of my family continue in opera, in many different places. On my mother's side, my grandfather and my grandmother and my aunts were all Beijing opera performers. One uncle taught in an opera school in Taiwan. Another was a famous television host.
On my father's side four generations are all Beijing opera performers. They are also considered Li Yuan Shi Jia.

My father was a very famous Beijing opera artist. He used to have his own school, and he invited many teachers there. In his lifetime, he taught over 500 students. Senior students in the school changed their acting name to Ming. New students changed their

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Shuyuan Li performing the role of Lin Chong's wife. Photo courtesy of artist.

middle name to Chun. Anyone who studied with my father could be identified as his student by their stage names. After the students graduated, they formed a performing arts troupe called Ming Chun Shi. (My mother also taught, but she didn't have many students. All of her students were women because they were studying the female roles.)

Since we were little, we were influenced by opera. My father's students all came to my house to study. So I saw how they trained. I watched how my uncle trained his students. One of the most famous Beijing Opera performers, Du Jin Fang, was one of my uncle's students. I always stood on the side and watched. Later on, he also taught me. Sometimes, I followed my parents to their performances. You can see, we trained from the time we were very little. You just live in that kind of environment.

When I was little, I didn't want to study opera. I wanted to be a doctor. But because of the environment in my family, sometimes they needed my help to perform small roles. One time they needed a little girl for a special role. So I went to perform and I went on the stage and I got on the train to go here and there to perform, and I felt it was a lot of fun. Just because of that, I slowly started to learn Beijing Opera. But my character is such that once I start learning something, I want to do my best. Also, my family is one of the best in Beijing opera, so I felt like I needed to study.

My parents were very busy and had to perform all the time, so they never had time to teach me directly. Also, in the beginning, I studied only the very basic skills, so my parents didn't really need to teach me. A university professor would not teach a kindergartner! My father hired a martial arts teacher to teach me, but he always came to observe and to make sure that the teacher was teaching me correctly. My father would critique what I did. My mother did the same thing. She hired teachers for me and observed on the side, making sure I was taught correctly. My teachers worked with me on different things. I had physical training: how to stretch my legs, kick, use weapons-all the basic skills. Another teacher came to the house to train me in singing, to train my voice. Another teacher worked on my voice tone. I also trained my voice by following the sound of the jinghu, called the Chinese fiddle, a main instrument in opera. All of this training was after school.

There are four aspects to studying Beijing Opera: singing, recitation of monologues, acting and movement, and martial arts. This is different from a musical or a play or a dance performance. In a dance, you mainly just dance. In

To learn opera, you have to be able to endure hardship, **to "eat bitterness."** You must be diligent, work hard, and have endurance.

This page: Shuyuan Li as The Flower Princess (Princess Bai Hua). Opposite page: As Princess Yang Gui Fei in "The Drunken Beauty." Photos from artist's collection used with permission.

a play, you mainly just talk. But in Beijing Opera, you need to know all those things. When I was young, I had to undergo basic training: stretching, kicking, tumbling, and work with martial arts weapons like staffs and swords. You need to learn how to walk , move your hands, use your eyes, hold your body, and how to put all those things together. After you have the foundation, you find a teacher who can teach you how to act.

After I turned twelve, I started formal training. I joined a troupe and started to tour and perform. I used to get up at six o'clock and start by doing voice exercises. If you wanted to do better, you just got up earlier! Other students got up at seven o'clock but I got up at six. And I trained by myself. After the voice training, I did physical training until noon.

During the time I was in the troupe, we didn't have a breakfast hour. You studied voice training, then you did physical training, and then you had lunch. You had no breakfast. Nothing to eat or drink the whole morning. During the training, you weren't allowed to go to the bathroom. This was a way to train yourself. Let's say, you need to perform for two or three hours. You can't just stop and go to the bathroom in the middle! So that was how they trained us. Now, I still remember that time because inside the school there were too many students studying. So my teachers asked me to go out to the courtyard to train. Even if it was snowing really heavily, the teacher would clear a path in the snow to an area for me to go and exercise.

"Si" means teacher and "fu" means father. Sifu is really like a parent. Whatever Sifu says, you listen.

At the time I was learning, teachers weren't really beating students. But my father's generation got beaten all the time. My teachers were very strict. They didn't hit, but they pushed us and handled us very roughly. My parents didn't really care how strict the teachers were. They just would tell me to go and practice. Students always respected their teachers, one hundred percent, all the time. Whatever the teacher said, the students had to do it. The word "Sifu" (master) doesn't really mean just "teacher." "Si" means teacher, and "fu" means father. Sifu is really like a parent. Whatever sifu says, you listen. If sifu says you're wrong, you don't talk back. When the teacher taught, you stood up and listened. You weren't even allowed to sit down. You had to be very, very, respectful to your teacher. The good thing about this kind of teaching is that you learn the importance of respecting your elders. Even now, there are some sifus who are older and I still respect them so much. You always keep that sifu and student relationship. My father, when he

[Continued on page 41→]

By Lois Fernandez

We shall not

Who is the city's blight plan for? What do people mean by economic development? How committed is the Philadelphia Inquirer to encouraging real dialogue about the kind of neighborhoods we want? The recent experience of ODUNDE, Inc. in our south central city neighborhood raises questions. "Growing pains plague an effort to spruce up the city," trumpets the Inquirer headline for the article "Blight plan snags Gray's Ferry Initiative" (January 10, 2003). These terms make it clear from the start that there will be no serious consideration of what gentrification means to long-term city residents, ordinary working people, and members of an historic African American community. Too often, "sprucing up" means removing people of color. And the so-called Gray's Ferry "initiative" is merely one recent speculator's plan to make a profit with no regard to the needs of long-time residents.

What is the future of south central Philadelphia? Is our neighborhood, one of the city's most historic African American neighborhoods, to be sold to the highest bidder? What commitment to affordable housing and to long-term community stability and history are we, as a city, willing to make? For 28 years, ODUNDE has been involved in our neighborhood. We have maintained a commitment to enhancing the culture of our city, and to cultural and community preservation through our annual festival and other year-round programs. Our festival draws 300,000 people and pumps 2 million dollars into the city's economy annually. We have a history of community activism and responsibility: we have responded to gangs and urban violence, offered summer programs, convened anti-violence efforts, and worked with schools and community groups over the years in efforts to stabilize and sustain our neighborhood. In 1977, we first worked for affordable housing in our community. The three lots next to our current building had long been vacant and were declared unsafe and dangerous several years ago. ODUNDE took the initiative, pushing Councilwoman Anna Verna to have the city demolish these threats to public safety.

We plan to build senior housing on Gray's Ferry Avenue next to our current building because we know that our senior citizens are in need and cannot afford to remain in the very neighborhood they maintained when no one else wanted to live here. We plan to build a cultural and historical center devoted to W.E. B. DuBois here because we know that our community's historic African American past is being gentrified out of existence, and because we believe that Dr. DuBois' work should be remembered, now more than ever.

About 100 years ago, Dr. Dubois lived in our neighborhood, and described it, the historic seventh ward, in his ground-breaking book, "The Philadelphia Negro." Ironically, African Americans remaining in this historic community have become the invisible people. And Dubois' insights, rather than being studied or valued, are ignored. It was DuBois who observed that "the problem of the 20th century is the problem of the color line." DuBois saw the connections between race, class and exploitation. For long-standing residents of our south central Philadelphia neighborhood, $350,000 houses (such as that proposed for our street by speculator Rick Sparks) simply do not count as "affordable." Here at ODUNDE, we believe that it is both fiscally and socially irresponsible to allow outside developers with deep pockets to determine the shape of our community and our future.

The generation who grew up and lived in south central Philadelphia were in many cases the first African Americans to challenge and break the color line. They were in many cases the first generation of homeowners: people who bought their homes for a lifetime and in the hopes of passing these homes on to their children. Our neighborhood has drawn strength and character from the commitment of such people who have chosen to stay in the face of whatever came. Pricing older residents out of neighborhoods disrespects their investment, denies that their life experiences are vital to our

be moved

Lois Fernandez at ODUNDE, c. 1980s, with members of Kulu Mele African American dance ensemble. Photo: Thomas B. Morton

future, and drives away the very people whose long-time connections to this specific local community history and culture give our neighborhood vitality, distinctiveness, and integrity.

The gentrification occurring in our neighborhood would be no surprise to DuBois, who clearly articulated how institutional and structural racism work to destroy our communities. If we really want to think of ourselves as a city of neighborhoods, or as a city with history, we need to begin by preserving the cultural, historical and economic diversity that makes the city vital. ODUNDE stands ready to respond with affordable senior housing and a historical and cultural center that provide an alternative to the politics of profit and greed.

This essay, written with Debora Kodish and printed as an op-ed piece to the Philadelphia Inquirer on January 17, 2003, responded to negative and incomplete coverage of ODUNDE's plans to develop property as a cultural center. ODUNDE, a 28-year-old community-based organization, founded by Ms. Fernandez, organizes the longest-running African American cultural festival in the city, held the second Sunday of June annually. ODUNDE has been fighting gentrification in its historically African American neighborhood for more than a generation. For more about ODUNDE, visit www.odunde.org.

PFP's website (www.folkloreproject.org) contains additional information about ODUNDE (including an earlier essay on the same theme), and about PFP's "Space Wars" efforts tracking batttles over public space, and preserving culturally diverse and vital community sites.

essay

By Shawn P. Saunders

Total Praise: Preserving the Hymn-Singing Tradition in African American Sacred Music

I came to be familiar with the Festival of Hymns choir because of my family. My grandmother was an alto in the choir before she suffered a brief illness last year. My mother has been a soprano in the choir since its founding. As a result, I see very little of her on Saturday afternoons during the rehearsal season. Add to this the requisite trips she and I take to department stores in search of concert-length black skirts or white blouses that can withstand the heat of a church lacking air-conditioning in the middle of July.

To be honest, almost every member of the Festival of Hymns choir (and the instrumental ensemble that accompanies it) is a part of the extended family that raised and continues to support and encourage me. Several of the singers were my Sunday School teachers. The director of the drama guild to which I belonged sings soprano. One of my acolyte instructors serves as pianist. And my algebra teacher accompanies the choir on trumpet. So it seems quite natural to contemplate the role of this choir and how it interprets, preserves, and celebrates hymns in the African American choral tradition and then to relate it to the importance of sacred music to the African American community of greater Philadelphia.

The first time I attended a Festival of Hymns concert, I did not know what to expect. I knew the music would not be the contemporary gospel I sang in college. I imagined that the music would have more in common with the hymns of my Methodist upbringing. In fact, the hymns were the same ones I grew up with, but the passion and exuberance of the performance surpassed anything I had heard before in church or in concert.

When Harrilese Durant Miles, the choir director, takes her position in front of the choir, I am struck by the power of her conducting. In front of more than 80 singers and musicians representing more than 40 churches from around the region, she commands attention from both the choir and the audience. She is virtually inseparable from the music as she uses her body to convey which direction the music should take. By the end of the afternoon, whether she is conducting a rehearsal or a concert, Ms. Miles is exhausted by her efforts. Indeed, singers, musicians, and audience often take time to regain composure during the benediction.

The Festival of Hymns (or Hymn Fest) Choir is dedicated to the preservation of hymn singing in African American churches. Under Ms. Miles leadership, this choir has been in existence for 12 years. The Festival of Hymns choir is particularly significant because of the role of the hymn singing tradition in Philadelphia's African American religious history. For example, Charles A. Tindley (1851-1933) was pastor of what was then the Bainbridge Street Church (later named Tindley Temple) in South Philadelphia from 1902 until his death. He wrote nearly 50 hymns, including "We'll Understand It Better By and By" and "When the Storms of Life Are Raging, Stand By Me." He also wrote "I'll Overcome Someday," upon which the Civil Rights anthem "We Shall Overcome" was based. Tindley hymns are an important part of the African American religious music tradition, which also includes traditional and arranged spirituals as well as contemporary African American gospel music.

The African American tradition of performing sacred music in concert began with the Fisk Jubilee Singers of the late 19th century. As with most music traditions, African American sacred music is constantly evolving. Hence, the traditional hymns of composers such as Tindley have been replaced by the works of Kirk Franklin and Donnie McClurkin. Members of the Hymn Fest Choir do not discount the value of contemporary gospel; rather they seek to preserve a place for hymn singing in the Black Church.

Harrilese Miles brings an extensive background in religious music to her role as founder (in 1991) and director of the Hymn Fest Choir. She was trained at the Julliard School of Music and Temple University, and has studied church music, specializing in Hymnology. She continues her voice training under the tutelage of Dr. Phillip Y. Cho, head of the Voice and Opera Department of Temple University. She has performed in concerts throughout the United States as well as England, Germany, Japan, and the Bahamas. She is also the Branch Director Emeritus of the Mary Louise Curtis branch of Settlement Music School. According to Mrs. Miles, "Hymns within the Christian Church are first and foremost an act of worship. They direct attention to what God has done. The Festival of Hymns Choir

strives for the capacity to express wonder, thanksgiving, and adoration."

Unlike most African American religious concert choirs in the Philadelphia area, the Festival of Hymns Choir is specifically dedicated to the performance of hymns. By choosing to focus on a particular style of sacred singing, Harrilese Miles and the Hymn Fest Choir (re) inforce the range of forms African American religious music possess. At the same time, the choir is able to create a unique concert atmosphere that is both formal and intimate. For example, the instrumental ensemble may include timpani, trumpets, and reed instruments more often associated with Western classical music. However, Mrs. Miles may also select hymns such as "It Is Well With My Soul" (Phillip P. Bliss) that were or are favorites of current or deceased choir members. Thus, the choir establishes a unique balance between old and new, formal and informal.

The Festival of Hymns Choir rehearses weekly throughout the winter and spring. The choir's concert season takes place during the summer months, beginning with an annual concert held at Janes Memorial United Methodist Church the third Sunday in May. For those who are unable to attend a concert this summer, the choir has produced three recordings: "Lift Every Voice and Sing," "Holy Ground," and "Diadem." However, those who have attended Hymn Fest concerts remain adamant that the true experience of the Hymn Fest choir is only gained by attending a live performance.

My mother will probably say that I was reluctant to attend my first Hymn Fest concert. Because hymn singing has always been a part of our church services, I failed to appreciate the art of hymn performance. Through the years, though, I have grown to understand how commitment and dedication can transform language and music. I am most moved by the choir's performance of "Total Praise," written by Richard Smallwood. In fact, I often close my eyes and imagine myself able to sing the higher notes the descant singers reach at the end of the song. And though I know I will never hit those notes, at those moments I am transported, briefly, and envision myself as part of the music.

Harrilese Durant Miles and the Hymn Fest Choir (left and right). Tindley Temple (center). Photos: Shawn P. Saunders, 2003

Three Latina musicians look to their roots for inspiration

by Elizabeth Sayre

“Está en mis venas” (It’s in my veins):

As Philadelphia’s Latino communities grow, the already diverse “Latin music” scene here will become even more varied. Most people hear the words “Latin music” and think Spanish caribbean dance music. . . .

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The field is actually much broader. If we expand "Latin" to "Latin American," it would then include European-inspired classical music composed in Latin America; folk/oral traditions of indigenous, African, European, Asian, or mixed-origin people; popular dance musics representing centuries of cultural mixtures; Latin American re-workings of pop musics like jazz, rock, reggae, and hip-hop—and hundreds of other genres. The products of particular histories of migration that in some cases date back to the 18th and 19th centuries, Latino communities and individuals in Philadelphia are actively engaged in music-making that runs the gamut from "folk" music to "art" music to "pop" music and everything in between.[1]

In many Latin American communities, music is experienced as essential and necessary. Music is a required ingredient of social events and life passages; in a visceral way, music connects people to community and history. Yet, people who play and dance to traditional music are also listening to, are affected by, and in some cases are actively re-shaping mainstream music. Folk and traditional artists in urban contexts are inevitably affected by and interact with their surroundings, and Latin musicians are no exception. Folk and traditional arts also influence and refresh mainstream art forms, as artists look for fresh and 'authentic' sources for new material (although this enterprise often presents political and ethical dilemmas).[2] Folk/traditional arts are not isolated from their surroundings, and they can inspire artists and musicians removed from the "folk" sphere by class, by generation, or by a history of migration. Traditional musics are powerful and sounds travel. If we extend the study of folk/traditional musicians to include the places and people they influence and the ways in which their makers reflect and remake pop musics, the sphere becomes wide indeed.

Giovana Guevara, Julia Moreno, and Venissa Santí have made impressive personal investments in their own music-making. Two of these Latina musicians were immersed in recordings of American popular music growing up, two were trained in classical music performance from an early age, two hold university music degrees, and all three write and perform music in the Philadelphia area. Each works in musical environments where women musicians must prove their competence beyond any doubt and either present a desirable appearance or struggle against the pressure to do so. Each grew up with Latin folk and popular music in her environment, but did not really come to value or understand those musics until adulthood; each is still developing her understanding. All three identify deeply with and are inspired by traditional musics of their (or their parents') home countries. And perhaps most importantly, all three educate young people and non-Latino audiences about Latin music traditions.

Giovana Guevara is a singer, pianist, and composer from Panama who has been in Philadelphia since 1999. She teaches piano at the Meridee Winters School, and works with her husband, Josh Robinson, Alex Shaw (percussion and vocals), and Adrienne Hall (dance) in a program that brings Latin music to senior centers and schools. She also appears with local groups singing and playing Latin jazz and Cuban folklore. Julia Moreno, a saxophonist, flutist, singer, and songwriter, has her own band called "Aguafuego." Her parents are from Peru and Ecuador. Julia reworks South American music, and many other styles, in compositions communicating about social issues. Venissa Santí returned to Cuba to re-connect with family and study Cuban folkloric and popular music for use in her work. Venissa performs jazz, Latin jazz, Latin dance music, and Cuban folkloric music with a variety of local groups, and is a voice teacher at AMLA (la Asociación de Músicos Latino Americanos) in North Philadelphia.

Giovana Guevera:

I was born in the city of Colón on the Caribbean coast of the Republic of Panama in 1975. The first things that come to mind are the palm trees, the smell of the ocean and the breeze. It's a very small city—it only has 16 streets.

My mother was always very involved in religion. She always sang her religious songs in the house. My father was entirely the opposite. He loved parties, dancing, and all that. He always listened to Panamanian traditional music, which is very danceable. So, I listened to both things growing up. I have a big family. We were 10 children, and I'm the youngest. I have one brother who has always played trombone. He's now a pilot. I'm very proud of him because he plays in a band in Colón. It's a band of firemen, very well known, an old tradition. They parade in the streets playing their instruments. My brother has been doing that his whole life.

I started with piano when I was eight years old, with classical music; I took lessons until I was 15. People in my mother's church were always asking me to play the piano, so playing there was like practicing until I decided to go to university, and I started playing more seriously. When I was at university, I played the trombone, the baritone horn, and the French horn for four years. I went to university in Medellín, Colombia, and graduated in music education. There was a lot of emphasis on classical music. Also we studied Colombian folklore, drums, songs.

After graduating I came to the U.S. I had a dream, and the dream told me I had to come to this country. I didn't understand it, but there was a force inside me that was so strong that I had to follow it. My parents thought I was crazy.

I called to Philadelphia because my best friend in Panama, her sister was living here. I called her, and she said,"Come to Philadelphia."

Just being in the musical environment here has made me grow. It has made me much more aware of what I can do, and of how much further I could go. I have begun to explore other musical styles. They're new but they have a lot in common with my culture, too. Latin music has something that I'll always identify with, whether it's from Cuba or Puerto Rico.[3] I'll always identify with it because it's the closest to home. It's closer than American music, it appeals to my roots.

The environment here makes you into a perfectionist. In everything, you have to push yourself, in the music, with the technology. So I'm going to follow this to see where it goes. I don't want my whole life to be this way. I don't know if I will ever be satisfied that I'm a good musician. But I think I'm going to get a good experience out of it.

Recently, I started writing music. It's strange, because it never occurred to me before, but I started writing and that's what I want to do. I want to record my songs. I write about past experiences, things in the present that I observe, and not just what happens to me, but what happens to a lot of women. I have also written more poetic songs that don't have any literal meaning. Ideas come to me almost constantly. Some of the songs are very folkloric in style. Panamanian, because that's what I identify with most. I would like to be able to do them with traditional drumming, but in a more modern way. The lyrics are about things that happen in the Panamanian countryside, the way country people see things, how city people treat them, that kind of thing. Or about the kind of work they do, and why they go to the city, and all those things that I've observed. There, people see it as normal. There's no reason to talk about it, it's a daily thing. But here—it's nice to express it because a lot of people don't know how people live in other countries.

Here I feel strange, in spite of the fact that I'm doing Latin music. In a lot of places where I've played, people are just sitting down. They don't move at all…and Latin music has so much energy and life. In comparison with Panama or Colombia, where people go crazy; they feel it, they live it, they express it differently. I still can't get used to this difference, because that's how I experience it, too. It's in my veins, and the mode of expression here is very different. I feel this very strongly. Here, folkloric music is used to teach other people about where you come from. I go to schools to teach children about different cultural roots. It's a beautiful experience, because music is meant to unify people, whatever their race, sex, or language. So, this is exactly what we do. In some places we have to start our program with classical music. We can't start with the full-out Latin American folklore. We have to disseminate little by little in order to express who we are. I've had some very different experiences. Some people have never heard it, but it fascinates them, and they love the life and the energy of it. I've also had experiences where it's completely the opposite, where people are closed, and they cover their ears. We hope to create different feelings in people.

Panama is a different world. There are Panamanian artists that everybody inside the country knows, a lot of traditional music and folkloric music. There's like all these little towns—it's amazing, they have all these competitions, and there's something called La Saloma. We call people from the interior of the country "cholos." So all the cholos go, and it's an improvised music. One begins singing about the other, it's like a battle, and the other one responds. It's great and they show it on TV. I would love to go personally one day to the place where they do it. There's a lot to it…it's very profound. I definitely want to go back to Panama to study the music more. I feel very uninformed, because I feel the music, but I don't really know it. I don't know exactly what the drums play or how many there are. I grew up with a lot of the songs, and they're inside me. I'm very eager to become a person who transmits information, who communicates the fact of being from Panama, of being a musician, of being Latina. I want to be a source of information.

Julia Moreno:

My Mom is from Ecuador. Her father was a journalist, a writer, a poet, a free spirit, free-thinking guy. He started his own newspaper in Guayaquil, Ecuador. He was a very forward-thinking man, not quite with the system, had his own independent ideas. That extended to all the children, especially my Mom. She writes poetry, and she has a beautiful voice. I can remember she would sing to us when we would go to sleep. All her songs were ballads from the '30s,'40s,'50s, just gorgeous Latin American music. My father is Peruvian. His father was a mathematical genius. He was an engineer. He invented things and was also a mover and shaker. He had the first movie projector in Peru. He would go from town to town, set up in the plaza, and they would show movies from everywhere in the world, from India to Latin America to Mexico to North American films. My Dad would fix the film when it broke. I also have an interest in documentary-making and multimedia and images and what images tell about a person's life. Which I think has a very strong tie to music. As a songwriter, I like to depict a feeling, a story, an image, and tell a story of political or social justice, or events, through my music. All those experiences of growing up in a family that's very strongly political and rebellious, rebellious politics, thinkers and

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poets and a love of music—all of that has kind of culminated in who I am now.

I feel like playing the flute was always something I wanted to do. There were free classes at a public school across the street from where we lived, and I just loved it. Andean music has a lot of flute, quena, the wood flute. I think it's the element of the voice, the breath, and the life that you can hear in each note. Later, at school my flute teacher invited me to join the orchestra. That was one of the most important experiences in my musical upbringing because it gave me an understanding of arrangement, voicing, different timbres, and different sounds of the instruments. It's an incredible teacher of rhythm. To understand when different voices are coming in, and tempo changes, and melodies—you have to really pay attention.

I guess around 11th grade I started fooling with dissonant sounds, which fascinated me. Out of the blue I heard some Thelonious Monk. And it just floored me. There was a whole world of music I didn't know anything about! My first song had a lot of dissonance. In college I started meeting a lot of musicians. I got my radio license, and started hanging out at the radio station at the University of Delaware, my first semester. I went to a party one night, which became a transforming moment in music for me. There were four guitar players, and there were three other flute players there. I'd never played with another flute player outside of orchestra, in an improv kind of situation. And we played till the sun came up, all the musicians. The flute players especially loved the jam. I thought, "Wow, this is what I really want to do."

I went to Peru for the first time when I graduated from high school. It was my first time meeting most of my family, which was incredible. It was the first time that I felt like I fit in somewhere. I remember one time when we were just walking around; I looked around me and I saw my face in other people's faces, and I didn't feel like I stuck out in a crowd. That, here I was, this is where my blood's from. In '96-'97 I went back to Peru with my parents. One night we ended up in this area of Lima called Barranco, which is an old part of Lima, really beautiful, old wood houses all painted differently. It's now like the artists' colony, the musicians' hang-out. So we went to a nightclub called El Ekeko, and there was a band playing. And most of the band was one family, and the patriarch of the family is Amador Ballumbrosio. He was, at that time, still singing, fronting the band. At one point that night he came off stage and started dancing the zapateo, which is almost like a tap dance. The upper body movements are very balletic. And then the foot movements themselves are intricate rhythmical patterns. The zapateo is a contest; it's who can create the most interesting, varied rhythm with their feet, and still be in time. Amador has about 10 sons and daughters. People get in a line, and each person takes a turn, and tries to outdo the other. It was an incredible evening of seeing all the personal styles coming out of this dance, and the textures, and the African rhythms that are in the music, combined with the Peruvian guitar.

So this music immediately touched me, and I knew that I had to go back with gear, and I wanted to do a documentary, and interview this family. And get their story, the history of this music, and preserve it. Two years ago, I got laid off from my job. I said, "All right. I have money right now. It's now or never." So we went to Peru, and we went to a town called Chincha, the cradle of Afro-Peruvian culture. Susana Baca is one of the most well-known practitioners. Also, Eva Ayllón, this incredible singer in Lima. Chabuca Grande is from the '50s, '40s, '30s, a well-known Peruvian singer. Elements of African influence can be felt in the songs, even though in those days no one ever recognized that officially. There's definitely an underlying racism there that I think now Peru is coming to terms with. But I think Peru is also loving the fact that this is Peruvian music in addition to the Andean tradition.[4]

We were there for the Festival del Carmen, which is in honor of the Virgin Mary. There's a procession, and the children come out and sing. The rhythms and the melodies are Afro-Peruvian. Amador turns out to be one of the most important practitioners of Afro-Peruvian culture, and all the kids in the town come to their house, and learn the violin from him. They just learn it by ear, so they have great memories and great ear training. Twenty kids playing these violins in a procession in the town, and then kids four, five years old, playing the cajón like professionals.[5] Amador had a stroke a couple years ago, so he's lost a lot of his ability to sing or to dance and to lead the family in that way. Some of his eldest sons have taken over. People go hang out there, wanting to do one thing, and end up getting involved.

My love for music and interest in culture are the foundation for my latest musical project, my band, "Aguafuego." My songs deal with political and social justice. As I get older I feel that my time has to be spent wisely in music. It has to have some weight and some meaning. I want to be able to give it to my children so that they have a connection to it. So, themes are about future generations, about the impermanence of who we are, but yet we leave permanent marks on the world. I'm attempting to write more in Spanish. It gives me a chance to express that part of my voice, and sentiment, and melodies that became part of who I was as a child. The next CD will have three songs that I'm writing in Spanish. Also, we perform some traditional Latin American music. Mostly we play clubs at this point. I feel like there's a certain mission, to have that thought conveyed to

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people who may not necessarily give those ideas much time and energy. So, if I'm able to, even for a few minutes, have someone think about those words, I feel like that's a good effort to create more thought and dialogue and conversation.

I think generally women musicians are expected to portray a certain image. And if you're not doing that on stage, then you're not considered rock star quality. I also think a lot of times male musicians have a certain concept of what makes a musician, and they have to be able to spit out certain theory as they're talking. Even though I was classically trained, and I have knowledge of theory, I know it in a very intuitive way. I can hear a melody or harmony and immediately sing it back to you. There's a perception that I'm not at the same level as a male musician who's talking about the theory, who may not be able to even hear the harmony. Understanding and skill level can be expressed in different ways. You have the intellectual approach, the intuitive approach, the expressive approach. There are different types of musicians. So, I feel that to be respected, it's defined in a very constricted, closed way. I'm not like that, so I rebel against it.

Venissa Santí:

I was born in Ithaca, NY, in 1978. Both my parents are Cuban. My Mom was from Havana and my Dad was born in Santiago. They came to the States in '61, with their families, when they were 12 and 11 years old, shortly after the Revolution. My grandfathers were artists. Jacobo Ros Capablanca, my Mom's father, was a composer, nephew of the Cuban chess champion José Raúl Capablanca. He was a sensitive, kind of vulnerable man. When he came he didn't try to get work as an accountant, his profession in Cuba. He didn't speak English; he found work at a movie theater, among several other jobs, and my uncle, who was 17 at the time, worked, also.

My Dad's Dad was a sculptor and a professor of art in Cuba. He designed José Marti's tomb in Santiago. He has monuments all over Cuba and in Florida. When my Dad's family came to the States, he got a job at a factory that manufactured decorative objects, and he continued his work on the side. My parents' families struggled to "make it" in the U.S. My mom's father had heart disease, and he left his compositions, his dreams, for me. I'm very lucky to have them in my possession. I feel that my parents are a really great inspiration to me; both are very successful in their work. They're very supportive of my going to Cuba, even though they both feel like they were exiled.

Every time we would visit my grandfather, he would ask us to sing. We would always say, "No, we don't know any songs." He would trick us and say, "You don't know 'Jingle Bells?'" So we would sing "Jingle Bells," or whatever, and enjoy it. He would close his eyes tight, and conduct us with his hands. He was so full of music that everything would make him cry—he was so emotionally deprived from not having it in his life.

My Dad had a bunch of records. I would play records, and sing, and do intense, choreographed shows in the living room. I danced my own style of salsa, and my Dad would put it on, and we would always have parties, and professors from Cornell and other Latino friends coming over. And everybody would speak Spanish, loud. We would go on trips, and go to friends' houses, and the kids would all be playing together, from Chile or Argentina or Cuba, mostly. In Ithaca there was a Puerto Rican couple we were friends with, and they would always have parties and dancing. My Mom always cooked the food. But my parents got divorced when I was nine, so it kind of broke up the whole environment. My brother and I lived my Mom. We would visit my Dad, and we still did all that social stuff, parties, visiting. I spent my childhood and teenage years in Ithaca.

I didn't know about Philadelphia's ethnic diversity until after I finished college at University of the Arts. There wasn't much of a Latino presence. I didn't really get into the Latin community until I started at AMLA. Growing up, I would be mad that I wasn't fluent in Spanish, and I would be burning up about how my parents didn't really continue that with us because they were divorced. Even then, when I was claiming, "I'm a Cuban-American," which I always did, I still had no idea I would go to Cuba. It was like some distant, far-off dreamland, never to be touched, never go there. Although I spent a lot of time in Miami, visiting my family, I was not influenced by the strong opinions there. If I had grown up there, I would probably not appreciate the culture as much as I do, because it would have seemed commonplace.

At school we would say, "Let's do a Latin tune." And it was always in bossa nova or samba feel.[6] That was what Latin was—from a jazz perspective. I kind of overlooked that music until later. Then, AMLA hosted Ban Rra Rra, a Cuban folkloric group.[7] There's been periods of time in my life where I have these ground-shaking, oh-my-God, what-the-heck-am-I-doing-in-my-life moments, and that was one of them—when I saw them. I had never seen rumba before. I had heard of it, but I thought it was more like the big band rhumba and mambo, and it was all jumbled. But when I saw them they were dancing guaguancó and they were dancing the whole vacunao and I got the sexual meaning right away.[8] And I was noticing how uninhibited and physical they were, and how human they were. That music, the culture, and the people really blew me away. They were beautiful. When I went, that's what I really wanted to study. Mostly I did folkloric music on my first two trips.

I've been going to Cuba every year for three years. I'm investing

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and they really opened arms to me, especially when he found out I could sing, and we would sing! So, they scheduled me for a reading, and I got a reading— I wasn't Shango. Is she this orisha? Is it that orisha? No. Yemayá. He said, "Ahhh!" Because he too was Yemayá. But I was so happy because I didn't like those cigars, I really didn't. But it went with the act. So I was happy that I wasn't Shango.

But by then I had an altar to Oshun in my house, an altar to Shango, I was buying the double axe, everything. That's all I played, Spanish music, orishas' music, everything, because it just had the feeling, and there were drums all the time, and I could play drums, and I had my own set of drums now, and it was like, "I've arrived." Then I got my guerreros and my elekes, and in fact had started saving money because they said, "You need to make ocha to Yemayá." And so I met some of the old santeros to Yemayá, little short ladies from Cuba, and I mean, oh my, we used to go there, and they would start singing. I would be trembling, it was so beautiful!

I had always wanted to go to Africa. I had a little bit of savings. I had to go to Africa, there was no way I could pass it up. And so, my padrino divined for me, and said, "OK, when you go to Africa, you're going to meet a very powerful priest there, and they will initiate you. But if you make priesthood there, we will not recognize it, because it's not our order. But you're going to meet this very powerful person, and you're going to be very much a part of that, but it's very far." So, he really gave me information, but he was also trying to get me not to go, in a way, because they wanted to train me as the person who sings in the bembes. They wanted to train me to be one of those singers. Because if I would start singing in a place, somebody would get possessed. But there was no way stopping me from going to Africa that time. It wasn't Arthur's first opportunity to go, but he wanted to go with his group. I went as the lead singer, and a lead female dancer.

It was 1974. When we went to Larteh, that was it. That was it. That was the powerful person that came out in my reading. Larteh is about 35 miles from the capital, Accra. It's up the mountain. It's an old town, but it was developed. There's literally a church for almost every Christian denomination you could think of: Holiness, Presbyterian, Anglican, Catholic, plus there's one of the oldest sanctuaries of spiritual and psychic healing on the continent there at the top of the mountain. When we arrived in Accra, we all got off the plane in African clothing. We were home, we were psyched up! All these kids—we were psyched up to the hilt! I was 22 or 23 years old.

Arrangements had been made for us to stay at the girls' school, and there was a big air-conditioned bus there to take us to the school. So, it was like a welcoming. One of the important places to visit was the Ghana Psychic and Traditional Healing Institute at Larteh. What's customary there is that they would send a messenger ahead to inform people that we were coming. So they had contacted the high priest to let her know that we were coming, When we reached Larteh and started to go in the house, someone shouted, "Ago, Nana reboo!" which means "Listen up, Nana is coming." So I see this black umbrella twirling, you know, before I see her. And when I saw the woman, Nana Oparebea, that was it. My body went into gyrations and I didn't know what was going on. Then someone asked me, "What is wrong with you?" And I said, "I don't know!" But I was weak! So they said, "It's all right, it's all right, calm down, calm down." So we get in the house, and there was an area for us to sit down. We sat down, they gave us water, performed the customs, and asked our mission. Then we all had to get up and go and greet her.

I didn't want the woman to touch me. Because she exuded this kind of energy. I couldn't look at her, I wouldn't look at her: I had to greet her, and I wouldn't look at her. We went and sat down, and I was sitting there, and still today, I can't remember whether I dreamt this, I read this, or somebody told me that I would meet a very powerful person, and it was a woman. So, this person, I knew it was her. This was not the reading that I had from Pancho, but I knew this was the woman, but I can't remember whether I read that as a child or what. But, in any event, that time she wanted us to perform, but we didn't have our costumes and instruments. We just went on a visit, we didn't know that we would be expected to dance. So she called her priests and drummers, and they drummed and danced for us. Later Arthur asked for a rain check so that we could come back and perform there. So, at that time she took us into her divining room and made prayers for us. She told each person what family their soul belonged to. That's when I received the name "Korantema," "Crown of the Ancestors" and heard that I came from a family of healers, and that I had a mission that she would tell me more about at another time. Because that information had to be given privately. I didn't care what it was— I wanted to get out of there, get back on the bus and go home! Ooh! It was the scariest thing.

So we went back, maybe a week or so later, with our drums and instruments. We had this performance, and she had organized all of these chiefs, and everybody was there. We did African dances all the way up to modern dance. I had a solo in the Haitian dance. So I had on my scarf, I had on my bandana, I had scarves in my hand, and I had on a big skirt. When my solo started, I stepped out and did these turns— that was it. I went into possession. They say I was speaking Twi, the

language that people speak in Larteh, and that it was one of their deities. Meanwhile, the company finished the concert; there was one dance after that. I don't know anything about that. When I did come to myself, the woman is sitting on her stool like this. I'm on my knees with my head in her lap. So, I'm looking at her, and she doesn't speak English, and she's asking her secretary, who's standing there, to ask me did I see it. "Did I see what?" And I just wanted to get away from the woman because her energy was too intense for me; I started shaking. But I couldn't. My legs wouldn't hold me. I went to get up, and they said, "No, no, no, no, take it easy." So, I said, "Look, I just have to get away from this woman." They led me in the room with the rest of the dance company. When they finished the concert and were packing up, they said, "Oooh! You didn't tell us you could do that." I said, "Come on, come on, y'all." They said, "Nana, you were speaking their language, you sounded just like them." I said, "No, no, no, no." They said, "Well, the lady was talking to you, and you were talking to her." And so, after that, we had lunch, and then she instructed one of her priests to tell me to come back, and she would give me some other information.

After we left there, every time I would get close to drums, the entity would come back again. If I heard "Da boom boom boom!"—forget it. Forget it. So Arthur and them, they were so sick of me. I couldn't get myself together. They were putting Florida water on me and everything, trying to get me together. Because I still had to sing a leading part.

So, I decided then that I should go back to talk to the old woman, Nana Oparebea, because I had to come home and face my mother, who was going to say, "Now what are you into?" It was then that I learned that I had a calling, and that this obosom had called me, that I was from a line of healers, and I was to use what I knew to help people spiritually, and to help with the suffering in my community. I was told that the obosom wouldn't leave me. I had the option of studying at Larteh to learn the ways of the obosom or I could pay a fee to have the old lady appease the entity, but there was no guarantee that it wouldn't come back. She said, "It's not going to leave you, but we can appease it to allow you to do whatever you think you want to do." So, I said, "OK, well, give me a chance to think about it." Then there was a priest in training who had been a schoolteacher before the obosom caught her. She actually was an interpreter for me. When the old lady left the room, she said, "You know what? That lady doesn't offer to train novices anymore, so if she's going to train you, you better accept the opportunity." At that time I didn't know that Nana Oparebea was seventy-something. That was 1974, so she was 74. But I thought she was in her fifties, something like that. I had no idea she was that old because of how she moved and how she looked. Maggie, the priest in training, said to me, "If you know what I know, you better jump at this."

The dance company had an itinerary, and we literally performed all over the country. My allegiance was to the company, and making sure that I was there. I think we had a weekend off, and that weekend is when I went back to Nana Oparebea at Larteh. I decided that I would study with her. I didn't have any money to appease anything—and I didn't know what was going to happen.

So, there, women didn't generally play the drums, but there wasn't a taboo. I mean, it wasn't that they couldn't. While I was there, when the drummers saw that I wanted to play, they would say, "Oh, play this." "Oh, great, play this." They liked it. And, in fact, whenever there was a festival or visitors, the old lady would call me and say, "Go on and play for us." I played, and they liked the idea that I could play. And in the Twi language, "pa" means "very good." I was from Philadelphia, "PA." So that helped. And the word really went around. I had people come to me at Larteh and say, "You know what? I heard about you, and I had to meet you." So, I mean, the drums changed my life totally.

What I learned from that pantheon and order of spirituality is that the drum is the core of the spirit realm for healing—to this house. Everything comes from the drum. My mother hollered and screamed, but she couldn't stop me. Even though there were times when I would drum at Ile Ife in the studio, and I would have men come in and roll their eyes and stand in front of me, and grit on me, nobody ever really tried to stop me. The drummers who played always encouraged me. The drummers who could play, they said, "Go ahead and play! Great! Sounds good to me!" That's what they were concerned with. So it was fascinating to know that the rhythms that I had learned here as part of the dance company, that you find in Cuba, that you find in Brazil, are the same, and it transcends. Like the 6/8, it transcends these geographical boundaries, and it's like the same personage. And I think that, moving into this realm of healing, it's really important to have that understanding or experience, that there is a core, there is a root. To be able to allow others to have a connection with that sort of activated healing process. I'm grateful. What I learned in Ghana about women drummers was quite to the contrary of what I was told before I went. People in Ghana said, "No, you'll find women drummers. You won't find a lot of women drummers, but when you find a women drummer, she's good, and they have a very significant purpose in this whole spiral of spiritual energy. So, don't worry about it. If you're there at the drum, you're supposed to be there, and when you're called to be there, you're supposed to be there." It's a blessing and an honor.

without it.

To me, it has been important for NANIKHA to come together from different religious backgrounds and sing our godlike songs. It doesn't matter what name we call our creator. We know the creator brought us together, and that there may be differences in our religious beliefs but we connect spiritually. I think that is the glue that always held us together as NANIKHA. We always pray before every performance-we just happen to use different names. That's very important, and it should be stressed, especially now. People can be of different religious beliefs and still have a deep and unified spiritual connection with one another.

Taliah Munir-Diouf: I came into NANIKHA by association. I was singing with Al-Jaamium, an a cappella ensemble, and performing at a lot of the same places as NANIKHA, and we just became friends. We admired each others' sound and we did a couple songs together. One of the members of NANIKHA was leaving and she asked that I take her place. There the story begins. Since then, it has been a wonderful collaboration of sisterhood.

NANIKHA has been, and is, a fulfilling learning experience that has helped me learn about myself as a woman. I'm the youngest in the group! NANIKHA has taught me to be an individual and have a point of view; however, I've had to learn to put aside personal perspective for the greater good. NANIKHA is about what is best for the group, not the individual.

As far back as I can remember, I've always performed—whether it was my family's Saturday night talent shows or dancing in a recital. My singing career got started when I wrote a song for Al-Jaamium. I was told to come to rehearsal. Immediately, I was asked to join the group. It will be 24 years, off and on, with Al-Jaamium. Singing with NANIKHA is the one thing I do for me. My family knows that Friday night, I am not available. If there is an emergency: handle it. NANIKHA keeps me balanced and sane.

In NANIKHA, we all have the same message we want to bring. We want our music to touch people, to have a healing effect, and to connect people to something positive. I want people to say, "That song really helped me." (And we have been told that.) Because we have chosen to be true to the arts and not become commercial, our rewards have not always been monetary. Learning about traditional African music is important to us. We do our best to be correct in terms of our presentation and pronunciation. Our philosophical position is that we care about the universe, people, and Africa. We deal with things from a holistic approach. We stand for truth, love, and peace.

In my travels around Philadelphia, people ask if NANIKHA is still together. We haven't performed very much in the last few years. There was a time when we received a lot of press and we were very busy. Nevertheless, we have been a solid mainstay in the community, helping to promote people's programs and efforts, and doing fundraisers and benefits. People need to know that we are still together, continuing our vocal training, working with master artists, and continuing to grow. NANIKHA is looking to do some great things. Music has taught us: Go for it. This is not a dress rehearsal!

Nadirah Barba: My relationship with Nia started in 1982 at the Center of Work and Knowledge. I was a former background singer for Billy Paul. My musical background consists of studies at Settlement Music School and Community College, where I received an Associate Degree in Music. I met Nia and she said, "Allah gave you a gift and you should use it." She asked me to teach her some of the scales and the vocal exercises I was learning in school and I agreed. So that's where NANIKHA's history begins with me. Music has always been important to me. It was something no-one could take away from me.

I believe that women should have something of their own that they don't allow anyone to take. I used to sing while doing my clients' hair and they would say, "You should sing! You should sing! You should sing!" That's what I decided to do professionally. I have always sung. Music has always been a part of my life.

The high points of singing with NANIKHA have to do with camaraderie. The fact of us working through things and just being sisters together is a real joy. I have a lot of respect and admiration for my fellow sisters. I'm just extremely grateful. I just think it is a wonderful thing. NANIKHA is wonderful!

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was very old and very famous, also had a teacher. Whenever my father went out to perform, when he came back, he always brought a present and went to visit his sifu. Whenever they took pictures, he always put his sifu in the center of the picture. What he did also set an example for me. I do the same thing to the senior performers and teachers. I respect them.

After lunch, I remember we started to learn acting, how to sing and the stories behind the plays. We also had time set aside to work on learning how to use the staffs. At night, we would follow the whole troupe to the performances. Sometimes, if my father needed a girl in a role, I would do that role. We were trained to go out on the stage so we wouldn't be nervous. We came back to eat a little and then went back to sleep after eleven o'clock.

Usually there were five years of training. And as you performed, you were also training. Myself, I didn't stop training until I retired.

After I was twelve I stopped going to regular school and just trained in opera. I had a teacher who taught reading and writing for about an hour each day. I had that class until I was sixteen. A teacher in the company usually taught theater theory a few times a week. But it had nothing to do with regular academic school. I didn't study math or science. I studied literature related to the operas.

Once I joined the opera company when I was twelve. I became a professional. I was performing on stage after that. In 1962, I was fifteen and we went to Tibet. The opera troupes in Beijing were asked to support the remote border areas because there were no Beijing Opera troupes there. At that time, the Dalai Lama had just left Tibet. Whoever was sent to Tibet had to be politically checked out and have a clear background. My father was considered a counter-revolutionary because he was a Beijing Opera artist. But because my father was such a high level performer, many high-ranking people in the government wanted to see him, so they cleared him and we were sent to Tibet for nineteen months.

Wu Lan Fu, a vice-chair of the Communist Party, Inner Mongolia, really liked my father's performances and he ordered us all to come from Tibet to Inner Mongolia in 1963. My whole family—the whole clan , the whole opera troupe of over 80 people—we all went, including musicians, performers, costume makers, and make-up artists. We stayed in Inner Mongolia for sixteen or seventeen years. We weren't allowed to return to Beijing. We were told that Inner Mongolia needed us. After 1978 and the end of the Cultural Revolution we were finally allowed to leave. But more than half of our troupe is still in Inner Mongolia. My uncle and my older brother all stayed there, and they passed away there.

Life was not as good in Inner Mongolia as it was in Beijing, but it was still okay. There wasn't much flour or rice. The food wasn't really what we were used to. If my family had been in Beijing during the Cultural Revolution, it would have been worse. We would have been in serious trouble. During the Cultural Revolution, we were considered counter-revolutionary forces, capable of strong influence because of our artistic skill and background. . .During the Cultural Revolution, our traditional costumes were all confiscated. When we knew they were going to take the costumes anyway, we cut a lot of them up and just used them for different things, to wrap things, and things like that.

We lived in the provincial capital in Inner Mongolia, but we always were sent out to remote areas, grasslands, to perform. These shows were a form of support for the local rural people and for the soldiers at the border. I play female heroines. My specialty is the role of White Snake, and Mu Gui Yin, a heroine. My mother also performed similar kinds of roles. But in Inner Mongolia during the Cultural Revolution, we only performed the Eight Model Plays. These are also part of Beijing Opera tradition, but they were written then, in the 1960s. The Eight Model Plays were repeated over and over again for over ten years. Everybody still knows how to sing those plays. Even little kids. Everywhere you went, here, there, at home, in the movies-everywhere they were playing the same thing. Actually, there are lots of good things about the plays. This kind of opera is a type of reform opera. Artistically, they combine Chinese and Western music and musically, they are very good. The government had a special group of people to write this kind of music. But normally, they are all credited to Jiang Qing, Mao Tse Tung's wife. Even up until now, they are still very valuable.

My husband is an opera performer, from Nanjing. He came to Inner Mongolia and we got married when I was 28, but then he returned to Nanjing and we were separated for two years. In 1978, I went to Nanjing joined the Nanjing Beijing Opera Company until I retired. My husband was also part of this company.

I came here on a tourist visa to visit my sister. I went to a party and I sang some opera. I didn't know people here would still like opera so much! After they heard me singing, they wanted to learn. So slowly, gradually, the Philadelphia Chinese Opera Society (PCOS) started to develop. More and more people started to get involved.

I never thought I could have an opera troupe in the United States. I feel so pleased. In the beginning, people here could only sing the Eight Model Operas. Because of their age, they didn't know anything else. After they became members of PCOS, they slowly began to learn the traditional roles. The main two professional Beijing Opera performers in the troupe are myself and Teacher Zhenguo Liu, a jinghu master from Beijing. Some new young people who were also professional opera artists in China have also arrived and are working with us, including my nephew, Li

Continued on following page →

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We've been without it. A lot of things I want to get back and then share with the community. It's also important to expose our culture to other ethnic groups who appreciate African culture.

I got my first sekere in New York. I wanted to make another one, but I didn't know how to string it. A friend of mine knitted, so I took the sekere to her and she helped me figure out how the stringing and beading should go. I get the gourds from California. They're already dried out. California gourds are fabulous. They have lovely tones, good shapes, and they're strong. Each gourd has a melody that comes out of itself. If you have four or five gourds, each one has a note, a tone.

After I receive the gourd, I scrub the skin with Brillo and cut the top off. I clean the meat and seeds out with a hanger and a knife. Then I use sandpaper to smooth the mouth of the gourd and the inside. Then it's ready. You can put some oil—palm oil—on the outside. Let it sit for a couple of days, then you can start stringing it. Some people put polyurethane or shellac on the outside, but I found it makes the gourd slippery and shellac cracks from the beads hitting it. The gourd itself has its own spirit; everything has its own spirit. It wants to do its own thing but you want to be in control. I've taught the women in the group how to make their own.

I am an African woman born in America, a product of slavery. My culture was stripped and forbidden. We were denied our culture. To get it back is great. It's hard to express—when something has been taken from you, just what it feels like, getting that feeling of getting it back and reintroducing it. It is important to me to reintroduce the African American community to the richness from which we came. Music is tied to our culture and is used to celebrate different events in the community. Women played powerful roles in African societies. Because we were bought over here enslaved, a lot of tradition was lost, music especially. The men here just wanted women to dance. The men told us that women did not play drums. Well, some believed it, and there were some whose spirit just didn't go for that.

From interviews recorded and edited by Elizabeth Sayre and Cathy Harris

Walking on solid ground / continued from p. 41

Xin.

I really hope I can organize a strong, professional program of a very traditional Chinese opera with all the elements: singing, recitation, acting and fighting. I want to do a good program with a good story. I really hope that we can make Beijing opera accepted by the American public. That's my real hope. I want to let Americans know about the real Chinese opera culture and tradition. But the main problem is financial.

Now, I work in a dental lab five days a week. Whenever I need to perform, I have to take a leave without pay. In China, when I performed, I got paid enough to live on. But here, if I don't do my job, I won't make money and I won't be able to perform. I want to stay here to make some contribution.

The question about the future of Beijing Opera is something that's been discussed for a long time. After the Cultural Revolution, there was a gap—a missing period of time. There was a broken generation where the tradition didn't continue. Not only was the training of performers discontinued. Even the audience was discontinued during this period. Now, it's difficult to reconnect the tradition. Chinese Opera also has been diffused by modern culture. I don't know if the younger generations will still accept Chinese opera. So it's difficult to say what the future developments will be. But this tradition must continue—it must be preserved. I do believe that Beijing Opera will exist forever. I don't know what the development will look like. I don't know if opera will ever be as popular as it was in the old days. It is difficult for young people here in this country to learn opera. You need to cultivate it. Even now in China, they try and teach young children in school.

Modern American culture for young people is a short cut culture. If you want to be a good opera performer, there's no way you can take a short cut. There are too many things you have to learn in opera. The reason why young people like this kind of short-cut culture is because they don't need to "eat bitterness." They can see results in a very short time. But Beijing Opera requires a long period of time. You can only have achievements a very little bit at a time. There is a saying in Chinese Opera, "Three minutes on the stage requires three years of hard work off stage."

I have never regretted learning opera. Many times, when I feel upset or unhappy, I go and practice singing, and then I feel happy again. I am in my 50s, but my health is still good because of the training I had when I was young. The smallest return, ignoring everything else, is having good health.

Interviewed and recorded by Debbie Wei, translated by Ming Chau

Latinas / *continued from p. 37*

in studying in Cuba. I feel an urgency to go now because I think it'll probably really change if something happens there. It's already really changed. Every time I go, it's more commercial. I am focusing on recording projects, working on some arrangements; one of them is the long-awaited homage to my grandfather. I used to want to be a big star… it's a really silly thing to focus on, because there's a special process, which you have to go through in solitude, to make music and to be an artist.

Notes

[1] Victor Vasquez's archival research shows that Philadelphia had a significant Puerto Rican population and economic connections with Puerto Rico dating back to the 19th and even the late 18th centuries (Ph.D. diss., Temple University, 2002). At the turn of the 20th century, "Spanish" populations in Philadelphia were mainly Puerto Rican, Cuban, Mexican, and Spanish. The picture has become much larger and more complicated since the 1980s, with many recent arrivals from the Dominican Republic, Colombia, and Central America.

[2] One very important Latin American appropriation of folk styles was the nueva canción movement of the 1950s through the 1970s, when progressive/socialist musicians in Chile (and other countries) composed songs using folk and traditional instruments. Many of these musicians were killed or exiled following the U.S.-backed military coup in Chile in 1973.

[3] Cuban and Puerto Rican music are in a sense the baseline popular Latin music styles in the Northeast U.S. In coming years, they may be ousted by Dominican and Mexican music, however.

[4] Andean traditional music, from Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador, and other areas along the mountain chain, is usually a fusion of indigenous music (frequently, flutes and drums) with Spanish-derived stringed instruments. Andean music is well-known among world music enthusiasts (partly due to its appropriation by nueva canción artists), while Afro-Peruvian music is gaining international attention since the 1990s (partly due to the racial politics mentioned by Julia).

[5] The cajón is a wooden box with a sound hole that is used as a hand drum in Afro-Peruvian music. Cajones are also used in Afro-Cuban folkloric music, but the style of the box is different. Many people are unaware that the cajón in Spanish flamenco music actually originated in Peru, something many Peruvians are fiercely proud of—an example of the former colony having influence on the former imperial center.

[6] Bossa nova and samba are Brazilian genres that are quite distinct from Cuban and Puerto Rican-derived dance music, and yet many jazz players know bossa and samba as "Latin beats," largely due to the mutual contact and influence among Brazilian musicians and American jazz players in the 1960s.

[7] The group Ban Rra Rra specializes in folkloric music from Oriente province in eastern Cuba, where there is a good deal of Haitian/French influence due to migration immediately following the Haitian Revolution in 1804.

[8] The vacunao is a movement in guaguancó, which is an Afro-Cuban street dance danced by a man and a woman, that depicts courtship, or "the rooster and the hen," as many people say. The literal meaning is "vaccination" and the movement is a quick jab with the pelvis, the hand, or the foot made by the male dancer. The woman, in response, has to cover up or deflect the vacunao in order stay in the dance. "Rhumba" is an Americanized ballroom dance, largely unrelated to Cuban rumba.

women's music project / *continued from p. 5*

and other endeavors, have modeled ways-of-being that inspire and enlighten in these complex and difficult times. Though they are of diverse backgrounds and practice music of very different traditions, their individual lives overlap and intertwine as members of a broader community of creative, determined women; as members of Philadelphia's musical scene; and as members of this huge inter-related world.

Another audience member at the March 30th concert left this message for us: "What happened at the concert is the peace and the kind of wonderful new world I strive for in my daily life." May real peace prevail.

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We're pleased to announce **"Look forward and carry on the past: stories from Chinatown,"** our new half-hour documentary about Philadelphia's Chinatown, illustrating the strength and complexity of this neighborhood. Touching on community efforts to stop a stadium from being built in the neighborhood (one of many fights over land grabs and "development"), and on other occasions when the community comes together (including Mid-Autumn Festival and New Year), the documentary attends to the everyday interactions, relationships, and labor—so often overlooked—that build and defend endangered communities. Directed by Debbie Wei, Barry Dornfeld, and Debora Kodish

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about the philadelphia folklore project

Folklore means something different to everyone—as it should, since it is one of the chief means we have to represent our own realities in the face of powerful institutions. Here at the Philadelphia Folklore Project, we are committed to paying attention to the experiences and traditions of "ordinary" people. We're a 17-year-old independent public folklife agency that documents, supports and presents local folk arts and culture. We offer exhibitions, concerts, workshops and assistance to artists and communities. We conduct ongoing field research, organize around issues of concern, .maintain an archive, and issue publications and resources. This work comes out of our mission: we affirm the human right to meaningful cultural and artistic expression, and work to protect the rights of people to know and practice traditional and community-based arts. We work with people and communities to build critical folk cultural knowledge, respect the complex folk and traditional arts of our region, and challenge processes and practices that diminish these local grassroots arts and humanities. We urge you to join—or to call us for more information. (215-468-7871)

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