

Balkan Music Camp

The high points of a week in the woods doing Balkan music-dance came in two directions: 1) making peace with my musical limitations at age 64; 2) renewing the specificities of my pledge to be sure that all children have *daily* infusions of rhythm & dance, affirming that all children are not only born to groove, but will, in fact and in practice, get to groove. This pledge or contract with children is crucial.

It's crucial because even though we are learning from the very latest research that it is possible to rewire the brain, rebuild brain functioning later in life, teach old dogs new tricks, it is also true that skills, muscle-memory stuff that gets laid into the mind-body forever with just 50 or 60 repetitions at age 5 or 6, requires somewhere between 500 to 5,000 repetitions at age 50 or 60. And five or six repetitions might be enough to have a skill, a feel, a way of playing for life, if learned at age 2 or 3. What I learned about my limitations at Balkan Camp was that my African and Afro-Latin skills were in the way, more of a hindrance than a help. I said to myself on Monday morning, I'm a drummer, that's my strength from childhood; if I could play a solid jazz drumset at 11 or 12 and be in the semi-pro symphony at age 13, I can learn Balkan bass drum and dumbek quick once I really put my mind to it. So I passed over most of the dance classes (might have been a mistake), singing classes, instruction on other instruments and went straight to my first intermediate dumbek class, the little hour glass drum that I've fooled around with for decades. I could play everything asked of me, but not with ease, not with the techniques of endurance, not with an easy anticipation of the next section in a sequence of rhythms. I had no "kah" to call upon, that's the little left hand hit with two fingers that fills in patterns and makes them flow. Next session was the beginning dumbek class so I went to that. I learned how to make a "kah" happen, but still couldn't execute consistently, and the women and little children present seemed to be getting it a lot quicker than the old pro.

After lunch my first lesson on tuppan or daouli: that's the Ottoman-Balkan-Romani bass drum that is the parent of both the booming bass drum and the rattling snare drum in all marching bands and jazz drum sets. The little stick or switch in the left hand pressed against the left side of a daouli makes a "snare" or rattle effect; the curved thumping stick on the right side delivers the main beats, or what appear to be the main beats. Trouble. The trick this old dog couldn't seem to lick was how to flick the little stick to anticipate the big thumps with the right hand. I'm very right handed. I'm a thumper. Staying relaxed and tickling with a little leftie switch in swift and precise hesitation within a 7 beat or 11 beat or a 13 beat measure was just not as easy for me as I had hoped it would be. And that's because all this little stick tickling and big stick thumping must be timed to coincide with an idiosyncratic Balkan dancer who may or may not put their foot down where you anticipate it will be put. I didn't grow up dancing Balkan or making believe I was a Balkan drummer. So my limitations are close to permanent and I have to find ways to play happily within them. My strengths that I have held onto since age 8 or 9 are also permanent and will always give me something that I can do or "dugh".

guaguaNgoma

overhearing clan mother fleeta hill
“to laugh @ Someone Dancing
is to laugh @ the Creator”
took some years to sink in
maybe all singing is sacred too
all of life all of what we *dugh*
(that’s the tiv verb for composing
by slow addition and quick subtraction)
so pulling out the song stomping the dance
very much envied in logical france
Ngoma the Mother is Earth we dance On
and In and Through and then we are gone
blessed be Interbeing passing Thru
blessed be the Blending of me and You

Currently we live in a legal world, not a natural world, most of the time. Contracts, cash flows, corporate institutions both profit and non-profit, make events happen, and can assemble people via networks to form temporary communities. The Balkan Music Camps on the West and East Coasts of the USA are beautiful examples of what people working together within the system can do to reshape community around music-dance energies. It was such a gift to be present for the 20th anniversary of the east coast camp, the biggest ever with 260 people participating. They have figured it out: how to sequence the lessons, hire the best instructors, have something for everyone, great food, great dances every night, and every night a party for the partiers that goes to the wee small hours.

Children at camp move from not in flow, not in the groove, to competence in dancing and singing and drumming and instrument playing. Children who come each year and find music-dance groups to belong to at home can become wonderful musicians and dancers at early ages.

Pat Campbell:

There are a number of musicians I know who were bit by the Balkan bug. I was, first in St. Louis in the early 80s, continuing into Sofia, Bulgaria, and Varna in the summers of 1987 and 1988. It was the music itself, the physical exhilaration of the dance, and the communal connection that was shared among us dancers that drove us to meet every Saturday night in the basement of the Methodist church in University City, Missouri. We were keen to dance the Bulgarian ruchenitsa in its division of 7 beats, 2 by 2 by 3, and the Bulgarian kopanitsa’s 11-beat metered music (2 by 2 by 3 by 2 by 2). We never counted our steps, though, but rather felt the 2s as “shorts” and the 3s as “longs”. In Bulgaria, where my American friends and I knew little of the language, we learned to feel the shorts and longs in the sounds of the gaida (bagpipe), tupan (drum), string bass, and other instruments, to watch the lead dancer, and to quickly respond to what we heard

and saw. The feeling remains, too, many years on, so that I cannot hear Bulgarian dance music without “twitching”!

* Possibilities in your community for dancing Balkan-style may be found through the International Folk Dance Association directory, accessible through <http://www.folkdancing.org/>.