

Of Drumming and Farming

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In 1932 George Bernard Shaw published a short story titled “The Adventures of the Black Girl in Her Search for God”. In this story, a young woman is compelled to leave her village in the heart of the African jungle to find God. Along the way, the young woman meets and questions notable figures from history, like Voltaire, Freud, Job, Mohammed, and Moses. In each of their visits the girl grows frustrated with their answers and brings their conversations to a close by striking them with a wooden club known as a knobkerrie. Not until the end of this story does the woman find her answers by simply tending a garden at home and loving her husband and children. Shaw’s final words of the story speak to her newfound truth:

By that time her strengthened mind had taken her far beyond the stage at which there is any fun in smashing idols with knobkerries.¹

Much like the young woman in this story, percussionists would do well to quit smashing musical idols for a while and start tending our own gardens.

Thanks to a generation of amazing figures in the late 20th century we have tried shedding the musical shackles of the past and developed a taste for contrarian aesthetic. But while the percussion community is busy exploring this tradition that is already over half a century old, a myriad of rich ideas still have yet to be developed at home. We can do better than simply trying to shock people with new sounds and concepts. Instead, maybe we can actually use these developing ideas to *compel* audiences instead of just *challenging* them.

Certainly we can do better than telling the same spooky story over and over again – an ominous bass drum roll cueing a clave accelerando followed by bowed metals – or this generation’s already caricatured sounds of hypnotic sixteenth notes and cascading loops of arbitrary material from a Mac Book Pro.

No doubt, the percussion community has much to say compared to the role players of the past, but the cultural landscape is different. *Every* discipline has more to say. History has never seen an exchange of ideas like the digital age has to offer. But unfortunately our ability to surround ourselves with new information too often mutates into a blurry social, intellectual and

¹ Bernard Shaw. *The Adventures of the Black Girl in Her Search for God*. Great Britain: R&R Clark, Ltd., 1932, p. 58

artistic echo chamber. The world's wealth of knowledge is at our fingertips and our next door neighbor still remains a mystery.

And still, strangely, an international presence seems to be the aim of many musicians' careers though few of us seem to understand what this presence could serve – especially how it would function away from the practice room, computer, or hallowed recital halls afterward. So for many musicians an esteemed local presence does not feel good enough. Image crafting on the internet has spawned a misguided generation of musicians who stop at nothing to impress one another. Even “above average” does not seem good enough anymore. We are training armies of lightweight percussion virtuosi – men and women, young and old, to be left in the digital and cultural wilderness, groping around for purpose, like the young woman in Shaw's story.

This phenomenon is not new, however. During the industrial age, in his essay on *Wealth*², Ralph Waldo Emerson recounted how transcendentalists were so eager to escape city life to a simple life of farming that very few of them thought to learn how to farm beforehand. Ironically, these intellectuals fled the trappings of city life to become farmers and, in doing so, simply became bad farmers. They needed to learn how to farm or this escape from industrialized life was hollow in deed as well.

Over a century later, our exploration of the world's frontier is oddly similar. While the rate of innovation in the world challenges us, we already have very powerful tools at our disposal that we must learn to use. Local communities across the globe, including our own, are desperate for engaged, articulate adults who can celebrate the *beauty* of what art has to offer – in all of its forms – instead of simply operating at our lowest common denominators.

If we want to change the world with music, if we want to light the digital frontier on fire with exciting, new percussive ideas, we need to look no farther than our back yards. The future is exciting, but the present is an even better time for action. When we take long looks at our own hands before drumming, and then share our gifts with the elderly, the children, the sick, with healthy, hurting, and joyful people, the world is more interested in what we are selling. Every minute we neglect to share our passion with others at even the most basic level, our heritage runs the risk of yielding to the constant hum of what Theodor Adorno calls the “Culture Industry” – relegating the arts to nothing short of fetishism – something that is exciting but not satisfying³.

² Ralph Waldo Emerson. *Essays and Journals*. Garden City, New York. Doubleday & Company Inc., 1968, pp. 494-503

³ Theodor W. Adorno. *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*. Edited and with an introduction by J. M. Bernstein. London and New York. Routledge Classics. *On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening*. pp. 29 – 61.

As a musical community, we need to recalibrate what it is to be a successful percussionist. Individuals young and old need art more now than ever and this paradigm shift will not occur only as the result of mysterious, once in a lifetime percussive masterpieces. It happens with a handshake before sitting on a drumset at church. It happens at late night jam sessions. It happens when high schools stop everything to watch a drum line, when college pre-med students enroll in steelband, when solo marimba recitals take place at nursing homes, when teachers show their students how to restring tabla, when parents attend youth symphony concerts and students share their garage band projects with teachers. As musicians it is our job to *celebrate* community, not just tolerate it. In the face of this challenge, we need to make available to our communities the work we are doing now, not just once it is impressive enough to astonish our colleagues.

Making this change will, no doubt, mean that percussionists need to know how to develop our skill sets beyond drumming. To learn from Emerson's farmers we need to design and maintain websites, appropriately navigate social networks, and embrace emergent technologies. But we must also learn to fundraise, design posters, build new instruments, create our own opportunities, understand the difference between colleagues and friends, contribute to projects already in motion, learn how to really listen, and, yes, even learn how to appropriately shake hands with board members.

Like Emerson's partners and Shaw's young hero, we too need to learn how to tend our gardens at home, regardless of what the digital frontier has to offer. We must turn around and embrace the joy that our communities' gardens have to offer – complex and beautiful with weeds and the most unique specimen plants.

Not every percussive undertaking need be a mystical offering to the gods of high art. All we need is to stay true to the joy of earnest music making in *all* of its forms. Because somewhere between the pious upstroke of a doctoral candidate's terra cotta pot concertino and a seventeen year old's high-octane, choreographed WGI bass drum experience, a truth quietly whispers in all of our ears – an urgent truth spoken so perfectly by the master educator Nadia Boulanger:

The art of music is so deep and profound that to approach it very seriously only is not enough. One must approach music with a serious rigor and, at the same time, with a great, affectionate joy.

We cannot afford to live only for the precious moments we are afforded on a stage. The world needs musicians healing communities now – every day in small, precious ways. If we can learn from history's musical contributions we should also be able to learn from her civic, ethical and moral ones. At this point in history we must not shy away from engaging local projects

with the same voracity with which we pursue internationally significant high art. Communities are in desperate *need* for us to approach music with the tenderness of a child.

Regardless of the time, regardless of the arena, the words of Jelaluddin Rumi are a fitting call to action

*Let the beauty we love – be what we do.*⁴

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⁴ John Wyre. *Touched by Sound: A Drummer's Journey*. Norland, Ontario, Canada. Buka Music. 2002