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The Mambo Queens are in a groove

And the beat goes on

Women gather to learn
and celebrate the rhythm of life

BY MITCH CALE

History, tradition and community will merge with powerful rhythms during the second annual Women's Drumming Conference, which kicks off with a concert Nov. 3 in Portland. If the words "women's drumming conference" conjure images of Birkenstock-clad hippies beating congas under a full moon, expect a surprise: These performers, many of whom identify as lesbians or bisexuals, are serious, talented musicians displaying a wide range of drumming styles.

The Portland-based Rhythm Givers will get the beat going, followed by local favorites the Mambo Queens. Afia Walking Tree and her Spirit Drumz of Santa Cruz, Calif., will bring the house down as the closing act. For those inspired by the performance, the conference offers ample opportunity to participate in several workshops throughout the weekend.

Cuba native Virginia Lopez, creator and director of the Mambo Queens, will lead a workshop titled "Elements of Afro-Cuban Percussion: Traditional Afro-Cuban Technique for Congas, Bells and Claves" from 1:30 to 3:30 p.m. Nov. 4. Participants also will learn about the history behind the rumba and other distinctive Cuban styles.

Lopez, a wealth of information and anecdote, is a woman who has made it her business to know every facet of the music she plays and teaches. Aside from performing with the Mambo Queens, she teaches percussion and traditional music, including the sacred music of the Yoruba people, who inhabited what is present-day Nigeria.

"What makes Cuban music beautiful today is the influence of the West African people who were taken to Cuba in the 1500s," she says. "Spanish music was influenced by North Africa, because the Iberian Peninsula was colonized by North Africa for over 800 years. The flamenco? You can tell it comes from Africa; it's all in the movements of the hands and feet."

Tississat, director of the Rhythm Givers and one of the conference coordinators, also will be teaching a workshop. She, too, emphasizes the importance of history in music but says the participants first and foremost should expect to "get their hands on the drum."

The workshops, with their active and educational components, are ideal for families, as is the kid-friendly concert. "Kids are the best critics," Tississat says. "If the kids aren't dancing, then you know there's a problem."

For Tississat, who specializes in West African rhythms as well as ones she has composed herself, the conference is one part of her quest to create a drumming tradition for women in Portland. She sees the drum as a tool of expression

but also as a tool of healing for women, a way to facilitate a sense of community.

She also directs a workshop called Rhythm Village on a wooded site in Nehalem. During the weekend, a small group of women "live together in village, cook together, drum together."

Tississat defines living "in village" as getting back to our roots by living together in a small group, just as our forebears did. She eventually would like to fund and maintain a permanent drumming village for women, complete with a lodge recording studio, spaces for drumming and a sustainable garden.

She also has great expectations for the conference. "In 10 years, I would expect to see more traditional dance incorporated as well as more styles."

Tississat already is planning workshops in Celtic and other frame drumming techniques for next year. What she really would like to see is "all women's drumming communities coming together." She thinks Portland could become a hub for women's drumming, joining the strong communities present in Santa Cruz and Oakland, Calif.

Mazzi, a Rhythm Givers member, is a recent drumming convert. She was hooked by a friend about a year ago and has been drumming with Tississat for about six months.

Drumming has been "the most powerful experience in my life," she says. "At first it's kind of intimidating...and frustrating, but the drum teaches focus, concentration and perseverance."

Mazzi, who began drumming with no musical background, helped coordinate the conference. She also is working on a grant to start a drumming program in public schools.

"It's a lot of work, a lot of commitment" but quite rewarding, she says. Adds Tississat, "When women get together and drum, it's a very special thing." **jc**

The second annual WOMEN'S DRUMMING CONFERENCE concert starts 8 p.m. Nov. 3 at Henson Hall, 3536 S.E. 26th Ave. Tickets are \$12 in advance from Mystic Moon, 3125 E. Burnside, or \$15 at the door. Workshops will be held Nov. 4 and 5 at Henson Hall. Admission to one workshop is \$25; a full pass is available for \$60. The concert is open to all, but the workshops are for women only.

VIRGINIA LOPEZ can be reached at 503-238-2465 or www.mamboqueens.com.

TISSISSAT teaches drumming classes at Open Gate Studios, 1007 E. Burnside St.

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