

Beat of a gypsy Hart

Drummer Mickey Hart comes to town with an all-star cast — and the universe

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Grateful Dead backbeat Mickey Hart has been studying the social and cultural aspects of music for decades from his perch inside the drum set. He came by this interest in instruments of percussion by heritage: His father was drummer and owned and operated a music store. But it was just after high school when Hart discovered the music of Nigerian drummer, educator and social activist, Babatunde Olatunji, and it opened up the world of possibilities for Hart. He would later study with Olatunji, bringing the unique rhythms of world beat music to the both the Grateful Dead's music and his own.

Hart's 1991 album, "Planet Drum," hit number one on Billboard's World Music chart that year, and won the first-ever Grammy for Best World Music Album. He is the author of four books, has testified before a congressional subcommittee on the healing power of music, and has worked with both the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian to digitize and preserve recordings of his own and others.

This month, the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame features a Grateful Dead exhibition: The Long Strange Trip. And at 67 years old, Hart has set out on tour with his band this month promoting his newest album, "Mysterium Tremendum." Hart captured the sounds of the universe and converted the raw data into samples that he uses on stage every night as the backdrop for his latest musical exploration.

The Mickey Hart Band comes to town May 10 at the Crystal Ballroom featuring a world-class, eight-piece ensemble; Mickey Hart, Dave Schools, Gawin Matthews, Tim Hockenberry, Crystal Monee Hall, Sikiru Adepolu, Ben Yonas, Ian Inx Herman — not including the universe.

"I'm taking light waves from the universe and transferring them into sound waves and using them as part of the composition on space as part of the music," Hart said when we caught up with him on tour. "It's a rock-n-roll format with beautiful songs and these amazing space sounds from 13 billion years ago. It's a wonderful adventure."

S.Z.: For those of us who haven't heard the raw data, what does the universe sound like?

M.H.: That's a good question. There are a lot of collisions. There is also a lot of chirping, a lot of thumping, pulsing. It's not what you would call music. It's what you would call noise. So what I do is I take that data and I bring it from the form of light, or radiation, into sound waves and bring into our very limited spectrum. And then I make it so that it's not noise, it's music. I sound design it. I take the raw data and I make it so we humans can make it music and dance to it and enjoy it. But it comes from those original 'seed sounds' that created the universe. It's the trip of a lifetime.

S.Z.: What is the significance of, or what



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are you saying to your listeners with "Mysterium Tremendum," your most recent album?

M.H.: It addresses the giant mysteries of the universe. Where did we come from? When did we become human? Where are we in the chain of evolution? My books in the '90s (Drumming at the Edge of Magic and Planet Drum) both were in search of where the groove came from. Eventually it led me to the birth of the universe, the beginning of space and time, from creation. Back in 1991 there were no machines or instruments to read that data, but now we have them. It kind of gives you your place in the universe because this is kind of an ancestral thing. These are the sounds that created the sun, the moon, the earth, us. So it's really a family tree in a way, hearing what the universe actually sounds like. Each star, each planet sings its own tune. I'm just listening in on the conversation. It remains to be seen what the relevance and the significance is except that you know that you are dancing with the infinite universe and that's what music is supposed to be. You are vibrating with the Gaia of vibrations.

Everything is interconnected in some way and this is a real scientific way of understanding that principle that we all are in this kind of celestial clockwork. And we are just this very small piece at the end of the chain.

S.Z.: Explain, in your experience, the relationship between science and art.

M.H.: Art is conceptual. Science is absolute. When we play music, we are postulating. Music is just a miniature of what is going on in the heavens. And that's why we play music, every culture. Because it emulates what is going on vibrationally speaking in the heavens. Music is just controlled vibrations. We aren't just drumming. We are using computers on the stage, we're using sounds from billions of years ago that we bring up and recall every night. The musician of the future will be the musician scientist. The days of just being someone on your instrument are drawing to a close. The idea of enhancing it and taking music to a new place with new colors and sounds, new feelings it's all about science. I like to play, so I use machines in my work

and my art. Some people just press a button. It's not like that here. Mine is more like an improvisational performance as opposed to a beat box.

S.Z.: In 1991 you testified with Oliver Sacks (a British neurologist whose 1973 book "Awakeings" was later made into the film by the same name) before the U.S. Senate about the healing power of music on the aged. What, in your experience, is the connection between music, healing and aging?

M.H.: It's the vibrations. What happens is when you get older the connections, your neural pathways, the way your brain feels vibrations, those connections are lost sometimes like (people who have) dementia, Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, they're cut — broken. And vibration creates a synthesis inside the cells and kind of reconnects them while the music and the vibrations are playing, so it becomes medicinal. It becomes life enhancing and a remedy. At least for while the music is playing. We don't know how to really make it into a longer lasting