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From The Times

July 10, 2004

## Pick up sticks

**Tabla, timpani and taiko, samba, rumba and salsa . . . Nigel Williamson on the South Bank festival that promises more bangs for your buck**

We've danced ourselves silly to its intoxicating rhythms and marched off to war to its martial beat. In some cultures, the drum is sacred, its thundering pulse used to summon ancestral spirits. In other societies, its rhythms are unashamedly carnal, an uninhibited and pulsating accompaniment to courtship and mating rituals.

Francis Drake slept in his hammock, waiting for the sound of the drum that would tell him the Armada was coming. Shakespeare's Othello paid tribute to its "spirit-stirring" sound. Today we've even invented a drum machine in the relentless pursuit of the perfect rhythm that never misses a beat.

Sophisticated or primitive, hypnotic or arousing, the drum is the most ubiquitous, powerful, versatile and oldest musical instrument in the world.

Every summer, the South Bank in London throbs to the beat of Planet Drum when it plays host to the annual Rhythm Sticks festival. The 10th anniversary programme this year is the most diverse yet, featuring more than 40 performances, workshops and free events over nine days, bringing together percussionists from Australia, India, Japan, Africa, America, the Middle East and Europe. The event comes to a crashing, clattering crescendo with an extraordinary composition commissioned from the classical percussionist Evelyn Glennie.

Called, appropriately enough, *Bang on the Hall* (Festival Hall, July 24, two performances), the work will find Glennie boldly transforming the venue's foyers, fixtures and fittings into one heaving edifice of rhythm. She will be joined by community music groups, including the London School of Samba, as she directs them in "playing the building". Floors, tables, chairs, banisters, walls and anything else that can be bashed, beaten or battered will be transformed into a giant, impromptu drum kit, accompanied by "an environmental dance soundtrack" created by the young producer M. J. Cole.

"What I like about Rhythm Sticks is that it fuses together all the elements of percussion, but it also involves the audience across all age groups and brings together many diverse groups from the local community," Glennie says.

Diversity has always been the watchword of Rhythm Sticks. But among the assorted congas, tamias, bodhrans, tablas, timpani and timbales from the massed battery of global percussion, the most unusual kit on show this year will belong to the Indian master Trilok Gurtu (Queen Elizabeth Hall, July 22).

The kit mixes Western drums and Indian percussion in a uniquely low-slung fashion which enables Gurtu to play kneeling on the floor, a stance halfway between the traditional cross-legged position of a tabla player and the conventional drum stool of a rock drummer. Gurtu's music is similarly hybrid, combining his Indian roots with African and other global flavours.

Talvin Singh claims that Gurtu has changed the face of modern drumming "by showing people a different language of rhythm". Gurtu shrugs off the compliment. "In the past I think I concentrated too much on technique," he says. "Now I've learnt that the art lies just as much in the spaces you leave between the beats and I've learnt to believe in spontaneity."

Among the many performers making their British debut are Jeli Masa, a drum troupe led by a dynamic young percussionist from Burkina Faso, Baba Kone (Purcell Room, July 23). From Egypt comes Hossam Ramzy and his Rhythms of the Nile (Queen Elizabeth Hall, July 21), whose fusion of Arabic rhythms and African beats have appeared on recordings by Chick Corea, Robert Plant and the Gypsy Kings.

The Caribbean is represented by Cuba's Horacio "El Negro"

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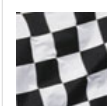
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extraordinary noise that is taiko. Long associated with Buddhist and Shinto shrines, taiko drumming came into the modern world 50 years ago when Oguchi took the ancient form and gave its rumbling power a new, dynamic and propulsive twist. Osuwa Daiko were Japan's first professional taiko ensemble and proved so popular that there are now an estimated 8,000 taiko groups in the country.

But for sheer technical brilliance, it is hard to beat the jazz drummers Billy Cobham (Queen Elizabeth Hall, July 24) and Bill Bruford (Queen Elizabeth Hall, July 25). Cobham, who has played with Miles Davis and Peter Gabriel, brings his Cultural Mix ensemble to Britain for the first time, promising a collision of jazz, funk and rock. Bruford, once the drummer with prog-rockers Yes, has expanded his musical horizons to become an innovative jazz percussionist and appears with the Earthworks Underground Orchestra.

Planet Drum also features workshops in samba, rumba, salsa, taiko, tabla and other explosively percussive forms that mean anyone of a nervous disposition would be advised to steer well clear of the South Bank for the next week or so. That's not the sound of rolling summer thunder. It's the concert hall roof being raised.

*Rhythm Sticks is at the Festival Hall, London SE1, from July 17-25. Tickets and information on 08703 800400*

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