

Franklin Kiermyer first came to prominence as a drummer, composer, and bandleader following the release of *Solomon's Daughter*, his highly acclaimed third album that features John Coltrane alumnus Pharoah Sanders on saxophone. Widely regarded for his intense passionate energy, spiritual feeling, and distinctive sound, his nine albums and many performances have brought his music international recognition. Franklin was born and raised in Montreal, lived in New York City for many years, and is now based in Oslo, Norway with his wife and young daughters. His latest album, *Further*, features saxophonist Azar Lawrence, pianist Benito Gonzalez, and bassist Juini Booth and is available for free download at www.kiermyer.com.

PHOTO: CARSTEN ANIKDAL



By Franklin Kiermyer

The Spirit of Drumming:

OPEN YOUR HEART TO THE MUSIC

I've always been drawn to passionate spiritual music. Regardless of the country or continent of origin, I've found transformative soul music coming from all over the world. I've felt that special vibe while listening to John Coltrane, the Qawwali and Gnawa music of the Sufis, Jimi Hendrix, South Indian Nadaswaram, and the blues from the American South. I've felt it listening to Korean Mudang music and in the passionate music of the church, the mosque, and the synagogue.

The music that catches our ear and moves our heart when we're young goes far towards defining the music we aspire to make ourselves. As a young man, I encountered a certain music that transformed my vision of what music could do and still drives me to go deeper. I think sharing music that has transformed us is valuable unto itself, but I also want to share some of what this music has taught me on a more practical level.

Perhaps you're already familiar with the music of the hunter-gatherers living in the Central African rainforests. These people, and various others in Asia and Oceania, have been called Pygmies, but that term is derogatory. There are at least a dozen distinct groups living in that region.

The most direct and perfectly natural music I have ever heard comes from the Aka and Baka (Mbenga people) of the western Congo basin, and the Efe (Mbuti People) of the Ituri rainforest. I have never heard music so stripped of artifice and guile – music so organic that the lines we often draw between the sacred and the mundane are nonexistent.

I do not exaggerate when I say that

this music has changed my life. It has been a primary source for understanding how music really works – in its magic, art, and science – and it continues to inspire me and help deepen my music making to this day.

The people I'm speaking of relate with their surroundings as provider and protector. For them, environment and day-to-day experience are not separate from the divine. No matter how we so-called moderns relate with our particular concepts of the divine, we generally think that communing with it requires some special circumstances. They do not.

For these people, music making is an integral and essential part of most day-to-day activities. Finding food, cooking, washing, learning, and playing, as well as special occasions like births, deaths, and other celebrations, are all enveloped in music. To me, that by itself is huge. Still more amazing is how this music moves me – how it makes me feel. But what really changed my chemistry happened when I decided to play along with recordings of this music to get deeper into these incredible feelings.

I was particularly enthralled by the polyphonic singing of the Baka. While it always sounded beautiful and "right" to me, it also puzzled me. It seemed that each person had their own song and would often just join in whenever they felt like it, without much regard for beginnings or endings of phrases or songs. The same was true for the various drumming and other instrumental music I had on recordings.

If I tried to play along with what I was hearing, or tried to copy one of the parts, it never worked. I would always be an outsider and somehow

get lost. But if I just gave myself over to the feeling of the music and jumped right in with my own part – no matter if I understood what the others were doing or not – miraculously, it all worked. It blew my mind that it didn't matter if I was in the same time signature as anyone else or even knew what the time signature was. It didn't even matter where I thought "one" was. It didn't matter if I understood the song, the parts, or the rhythm, as long as I was resting in what I was doing and feeling the others. All I had to do was open my heart to the music and have faith in my intuition. Think about that for a moment.

This is some of the most soulful and deeply grooving music I've ever heard, but it's functioning doesn't rely as much on prescribed parts or structures or rules or even a "one" as much as it does on openness and feel and heart. For me, this was a game-changer.

Please go and listen to some of this music. You can find some examples by searching the web for videos of Mbuti music, Baka music, or music of the Ituri. Try to sing or play along with it. See what happens when you try to figure out what they're doing. Then see what happens when you just believe in the magic of what's going on and simply sing or play whatever you feel at the same time as the others.

I know it can seem like these people are worlds apart from us – how we live, what we know, and what we want – but through feeling their music, I think you'll see that we are all mostly the same. Dig?

So, that's all for now, sisters and brothers of the drum. I'll say more next issue.