

# Tom Teasley

## Meditating On The Rhythms Of The World



By j. poet

“I’m a lucky guy,” says Tom Teasley, flashing his winning smile. He’s sitting in his studio, surrounded by recording equipment and hundreds of hand drums, gongs, and exotic percussion instruments, many of which he’s picked up on his travels as a cultural envoy for the Department Of State. “My interest in world music has allowed me to develop an unusual career as a solo percussionist. Like most hand drummers, I play with bands on occasion, but I do over 200 shows a year as a solo artist.”

In addition to his solo shows, Teasley teaches and contributes musical scores and sound design to a wide variety of projects. He provides music to theater productions like the Constellation Theater Company’s adaptation of Girish Karnad’s play, *The Fire And The Rain*, and live soundtracks for silent films like Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* and Lotte Reiniger’s 1926 animated film *Die Abenteuer des Prinzen Achmed*. The music is Teasley’s fusion of jazz and world music impulses. “I use my jazz training, classical percussion experience, and knowledge of world percussion when I’m playing along with films,” Teasley explains. “The film becomes the song, because some actions must have musical cues to define them, like playing the head to a tune. After that, you improvise and play the solo, if you will. That’s why it’s so compelling to work with film and theater.”

The rhythms of the world percolated through Teasley’s blood even before he started playing music. “I grew up in a middle class neighborhood in Washington,

DC,” Teasley says. “It was during the early days of desegregation, which was a blessing. In elementary and high school, I developed friendships with African American kids, as well as boys from the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America. My friends introduced me to the music they listened to, but more importantly, developing those friendships at an early age introduced me to the cultures they grew up in.

“Music is a reflection of the people, society, and culture it represents. That became evident to me when I started traveling as a cultural envoy for the State Department. I’d been studying the rhythms and playing techniques of music from all around the world, but stepping off a plane in the Middle East and smelling the air, eating the food, meeting the people, and seeing the countryside made me relate to the music in a way that was not academic. [The music] became a living part of my life.”

When he was younger, nobody Teasley knew played drums, but he felt percussion was his calling, almost on a cellular level. “I started playing in grammar school, right after I first heard the sound of a stick hitting a snare drum. The drums [for the school band] were stored in the cafeteria and every time I passed a snare drum, I’d tap on it. The sound affected me, even before I heard somebody playing it.

Something about the snap a drumstick made got into my core.

“I’ve recently been discussing the Indian philosophy of sound and its effects on the body with Doctor Siddharth Shah, which was a revelation. Looking back, I can still feel the echoes of that crack I felt the first time I heard someone hit a drum.”

Shah has been commissioned by USAID, a federal agency dedicated to helping people deal with the trauma of natural disasters and war. “Shah contacted me to provide musical inspiration for his guided meditations for USAID workers and soldiers returning from stressful situations,” Teasley explains. “I’d been playing with the Redwell Theater Company, a group of therapists and doctors based in Washington, DC. They approach theater and group therapy as healing arts by presenting staged readings of plays. I provide the sound design and compose pieces for these presentations. Dr. Shah heard some of the scores I’d done and asked me to work with him to create therapeutic sounds for his guided meditations.”

People often think of percussion as driving and forceful, which it can be, but Teasley’s work with Redwell and Shah made him focus on the contemplative aspects of percussion. Native American peyote ceremonies, Indian music for meditation, Tibetan chanting and gongs,

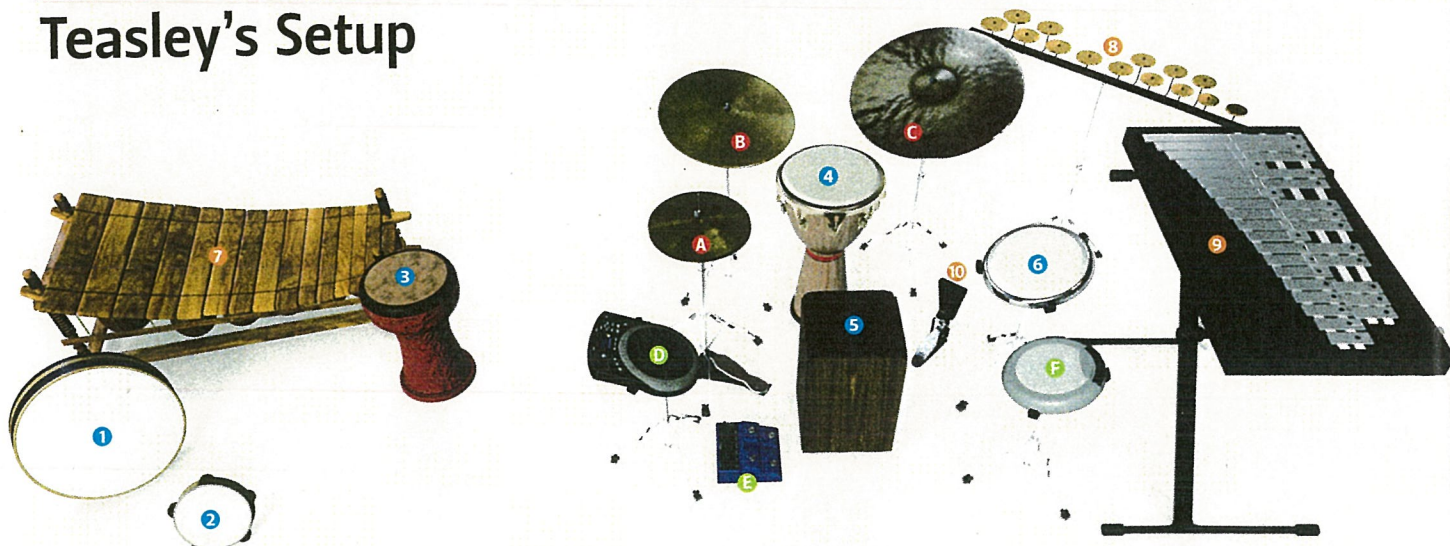
and other traditions use subtle percussion to generate meditative states.

“I practice meditation, yoga, and tai chi, but like much of my career, the work with healing sound came to me as opposed to my pursuing it. At the same time I was working with the Redwell Theater Company, I was collaborating with director Allison Arkell Stockman at the Constellation Theater Company on music for an adaptation of Girish Karnad’s play, *The Fire And The Rain*. I’d also started work on a new solo album, *Dreams Of India*. The play has an introspective atmosphere and that fit in with the ideas I was developing for *Dreams Of India*, a combination of quiet and more energetic compositions.

“If you listen carefully to the recording, you’ll hear the use of breath is a dominant part of the music. I found myself growing more interested in the esoteric quality of breath, both literally and figuratively. By working on them concurrently, they informed each other. I’d be working up something for the play and think, ‘This piece is too intense, but it would go well in *Dreams Of India*.’

“A meditative play, as well as meditative music for an Indian doctor and my own album, all came together at the same time. As it turned out, *Dreams Of India* became the soundtrack for *The Fire And The Rain*.”

## Teasley’s Setup



### DRUMS

- 1 Cooperman Custom Bodhran
- 2 Cooperman Riq
- 3 Remo Soloist Dumbek
- 4 LP Galaxy Djembe
- 5 LP Kevin Ricard Americana Series Cajon
- 6 LP Giovanni Compact Conga

### KEYBOARD PERCUSSION

- 7 Imported African Gyli
- 8 Sabian Crotales
- 9 Yamaha Glockenspiel

### PERCUSSION

- 10 LP Black Beauty Cowbell

### CYMBALS

- A Sabian 13" HH Light Hi-Hats
- B Sabian 16" Manhattan Crash/Ride
- C Sabian 20" Artisan Ride

### ELECTRONICS

- D Roland HandSonic
- E Digidtech Looper
- F Korg Wavedrum

Tom Teasley also uses Remo heads, and Vic Firth sticks, brushes, and mallets.

## Tom Teasley

Teasley's music and the play are based *The Mahabharata*, an epic Indian poem that is thought to be over 10,000 years old. "It's an encyclopedia of spiritual knowledge," Teasley says. "I was creating text painting, an operatic device where the words that are being said/sung have an instrumental counterpart creating a complementary sound. During the song 'Silver Rain,' it actually rains on stage, so I use light, sparse cymbal work, a hang drum, and a glockenspiel to imply the sound of raindrops. Our play takes a little over two hours to present. In India, they perform the whole epic — it can go on for a week. It's quite a contrast to our culture where people can't watch a two minute YouTube video all the way through."

*Dreams Of India* came together in Teasley's home studio. Using his Pro Tools rig and a couple of good mikes and preamps, he'd record a basic rhythm track using a Roland HandSonic, Korg Wavedrum, dumbek, or frame drum. He'd take the raw tracks to engineer and collaborator Jim Robeson to add and subtract additional layers of sound. "The room at Jim's studio gives a great sound to the cajon, melodica, flutes, cymbals, and hi-hat. I'd play my own hybrid kit. It's not a drum kit in the traditional sense. It includes a cowbell I play with a foot pedal, cajon, dumbek, djembe, pandeiro, bongos, and cymbals. I frequently take a Sabian Artisan ride cymbal and stereo mike it, using two mikes panned to either side. I'll play the bell of the cymbal with my right hand and the center of the cymbal with the left hand — like playing ride and snare

drum in a traditional drum kit transferred to one instrument."

The music is a genre-demolishing blend of jazz, blues, and Indian classical modes, although Teasley points out that, while his music draws on the complex structures of Indian music, it's filtered through his musical experiences as an American lover of world music. "I like taking an instrument from one part of the world and playing it with techniques used in another part of the world, and having instruments from diverse cultures in dialogue with each other, combining riq and hi-hat cymbals, or frame drums, kalimbas, and crotales."

Teasley uses sitar-like notes from a synthesizer and a Middle Eastern melody played on an alto melodica to support the flurry of rhythms on "Om Tat Sat." It's in 11/4, and features three different rhythms played in three different speeds on dumbek, tabla, and konnakol, the Indian art of performing percussion strokes using vocal sounds. Its complex, head-spinning structure suggests dub reggae, gamelan, vocalese, and Indian hip-hop. "Sacrifice" is an understated blues with keyboards producing a sound halfway between slide guitar and sitar. Subliminal notes from a kalimba, rich bass tones of a cajon, and sparse crotales accents dance around the frame drum rhythms Teasley coaxes out of several Remo Tablatones. On the more animated side, you have "Fists Of Karna," an impressive workout on the kanjira, a South Indian tambourine with a single jingle, using jazzy rhythms played with techniques from South Italy. "Fire Dance" is an energetic workout in 7/4 featuring Teasley's dumbek

supported by the Roland HandSonic on the high end playing off of a spirited exchange between cajon, djembe, and dumbek.

"Korg Wavedrums and the Roland HandSonic have become a big part of my work," Teasley says. "I'm able to use the technique and nuance I get from acoustic instruments on these electronic instruments to get organic sounds out of them. Looping phrases from them allows me to create a backing band for my recordings and performances. My worldview of percussion includes a big geographic swath of drumming traditions from all over the world — Africa, South America, India — and a timeline that encompasses ancient instruments and the most recent developments in music technology."

Teasley wants to share the knowledge he's picked up over the years, and initiated a Skype lesson program, put dozens of videos with helpful hand drumming techniques up on YouTube, and is currently finishing up work on his first instruction book/DVD: *An American Approach To World Percussion*. "It's a task-specific workbook for combining my studies as a classical percussionist, my years of studying drumming with Joe Morello and other jazz masters, and my interest and love of world percussion."

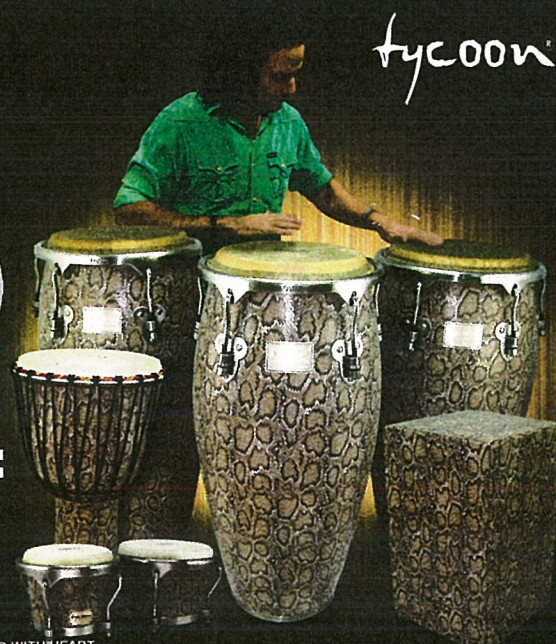
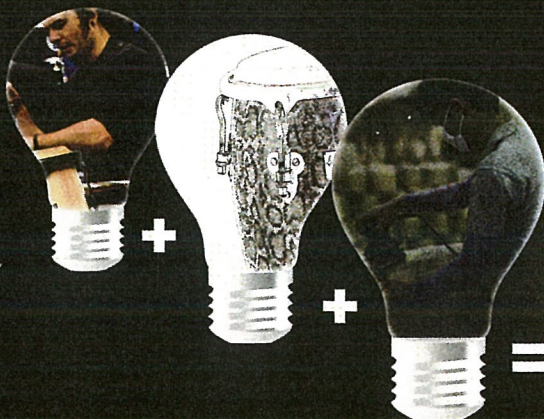
"I wanted to continue the concept of the drum kit as the first American contribution to world percussion. The bass drum and snare are from Europe, the tom toms are from China, and the cymbals are from Turkey. My concept may be a departure, but it's rooted in the jazz tradition that came together in the United States in New Orleans, where music from Latin America,

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Cuba, and Africa blended. I've created a set that includes djembe, riq, hi-hat, cajon, frame drums, crotales, and glockenspiel to create a hybrid drum kit. I'm taking the western concepts of rudiments, jazz, and funk four-part coordination and applying it to these more exotic instruments."

Teasley often refers to himself as an accidental percussionist because it was the sound of the traditional drum kit that first attracted his attention. "I was getting professional gigs in cover bands when I was still in grammar school," he recalls. "I studied classical percussion at Baltimore's Peabody Conservatory and was lucky enough to have two great timpani teachers, Fred Begum and Charles Memphis. [Memphis] was of Greek descent and started showing me the Greek rhythms that I'm still using today and, although I never played timpani for a living, [Begum's] love of music informs everything I've ever done.

"When I graduated, I started touring and often found myself in New Orleans. The well the drummers in New Orleans drew from was deeper than the well of the drummers I was used to hearing. That made me start seeking out the drummers and percussionists from Africa and the Caribbean who contributed to that rich musical gumbo. Then it was on to India, the Middle East, and the rest of the world. World fusion hand drumming became my passion."

Along the way, Teasley studied with some of the world's best-known musicians. "Yacub Addy founded Odadda!, the first African drumming and dance group to play in the United States. I was used to having lessons that were very well organized: 'Here's what I want you to come back and

play next week.' Yacub would give me a simple bell pattern to play and I'd have to play that for an hour, while he'd play everything that revolved around that pattern. I began to absorb it in an intuitive way, not in a cognitive way. It's the technique I use today in my own teaching.

"Glen Velez was a huge influence. I only studied with him a bit, but his concepts of percussion — taking from all the frame drumming traditions to create a pan-global approach — is something I've done, although casting a wider net, not that anything I've ever done is better than Glen's approach.

"My approach to jazz comes from studying with Joe Morello, off and on for about ten years. Most of the work on *An American Approach* is influenced by my studies with him. Taking the exercises he gave me based on Ted Reed's *Progressive Steps To Syncopation* helped me delve deeply into the complex rhythmic structures of various world music traditions and gave me a systematic way to practice an improvisational art form."

As he got deeper into more diverse percussion traditions, Teasley began traveling to experience the music firsthand. "I was invited to an international music festival in Bahrain and, when I saw a group of Bahraini drummers, I couldn't believe what I was hearing: a blend of African and Middle Eastern impulses. I scrapped my program and said I want to play with these guys. In 30 minutes, we put together a program. Representatives from the US Embassy and the Cultural Minister from Bahrain were there. Them seeing an American performing with Middle Eastern

musicians on the same stage spawned my career as a cultural ambassador. The US State Department sent me back to Bahrain, then to Saudi Arabia and Jerusalem to play with Palestinian and Israeli musicians, and put together an ensemble using music from both traditions. I've gone to the Kurdish areas of Northern Iraq to teach and collaborate with Kurdish musicians trained in Persian traditional music. Later this year, I'm going to South Korea to collaborate with artists there."

In the meantime, Teasley and his engineer Jim Robeson are remixing tracks from *Dreams Of India* and composing new music to complement Dr. Shah's therapy work and for release on CD as *Vibrations For Peace And Strength*. "The tracks use binaural beats. In this case, 'beats' refer to a method of using a frequency that's ever so slightly out of tune with itself. Our usage starts with low frequencies and make variations with a very, very small incremental difference. It creates a relaxation response, sort of a brain massage that produces healing energy."

He's also working on a score for playwright Mary Zimmerman's adaptation of *Journey To The West*. "The play tracks a monk traveling from China to India," Teasley explains. "The percussion compositions will be a departure for me. I'll be doing more stick work, rather than hand drumming. I'm using Chinese dragon drum, cymbals, and gongs, and other traditional Chinese instruments combined with my existing kit. In addition, I'll be triggering samples of Chinese and Indian instruments electronically. This score will have more of a jazz flavor than I've had with my last couple of recordings." □

## A SELECTED TOM TEASLEY DISCOGRAPHY



1989  
*Balancing Act*  
TOM TEASLEY



1994  
*Catfish Blues*  
BOB "CATFISH" HODGE



1997  
*Time Travel*  
TOM TEASLEY



1998  
*Poetry Prose Percussion And Song*  
CHARLES WILLIAM & TOM TEASLEY



1999  
*Global Standard Time*  
TOM TEASLEY



2000  
*Soup Happens*  
HOT SOUP



2003  
*Global Groovilization*  
TOM TEASLEY



2005  
*Kindle A Flame*  
MYSTIC HARMONY



2005  
*Global Fusion Percussion*  
TOM TEASLEY



2006  
*The Soul Dances*  
WORD-BEAT



2007  
*Painting Time*  
TOM TEASLEY



2008  
*Mystic Christmas*  
MYSTIC HARMONY



2010  
*Diamond In The Rough*  
NASAR ABADEY



2010  
*Count Me In*  
CAROLYN WATERS



2012  
*All The World's A Stage*  
TOM TEASLEY



2014  
*The Love Of The Nightingale*  
TOM TEASLEY



2015  
*I See Trouble*  
BILL STARKS



2015  
*Dreams Of India*  
TOM TEASLEY