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PROFILE & PHOTOS
BY DEBRA DEANGELO

THE MAGIC OF RHYTHM

A visit with Pagan drummer Don Schulz

The first sound heard by human ears is the drum... from inside the womb.

“Everyone grew up listening to the drumbeat of their mother’s heartbeat for the first nine months of their lives,” says drum maker Don Schulz. “When you play a drum, your body gets involved on the molecular level.”

Drums exist in every culture, on every continent, and in every epoch. The sound of the drum, the joy and satisfaction of creating rhythm with our own hands, is universal in humanity. We may not speak the same language, but we can all drum the same beat.

Don discovered drumming almost accidentally. A former sound system salesman, he was invited to attend a book signing by Holly Blue Hawkins at Barnes & Noble, where his wife, Pam, worked.

“Holly had a mother drum, *The Heart of Peace*,” Don relates. “She was traveling around the country doing festivals and protests, and she wrote a book about her experience with the drum. At the book signing, she said, ‘Everybody grab a stick and gather round.’ After 45 minutes, I looked at Pam and said, ‘I need to make one of these.’”

With no drum craftsman available to guide him, Schulz says, “I just started listening to the voices in my head. I set out and found a lot of ways to do it badly.” Guided by instinct and intuition, he set out to make his own mother drum. He found the hoop and the hide, and on Summer Solstice made his first mother drum, *Thundering Moon*.

Don introduced *Thundering Moon* to the world at a festival, planning only to play the drum. A friend in attendance was impressed, and asked Don, “Can you make me one? How much?”

“And... that’s when the lightbulb went off,” he says.

This was the birth of The Different Drum, Schulz’ drum-making business, which he runs out of his garage in Citrus Heights, California. However, he doesn’t merely make drums and sell them. He holds workshops periodically throughout the year, where he guides anyone – regardless of their craft-making talent (or lack thereof) – through the process of making a drum. Each student gets a “kit” to start: a round piece of wet pre-soaked hide, a lace made from that hide, and a hoop. His hides are typically buffalo, elk, and deer, which he buys from Native American hunters who make their kills with respect and seek to use all parts of the animal.

Schulz admits that he sometimes gets questions about his practice from folks who question whether he is appropriating the craft of indigenous people. However, he points to the drum’s expansive presence across all of human history and culture, not confined to any one culture, or even one continent.

“Drums are part of the human subconscious,” he says. “They are a 10-12,000 year old art form. We all have lineage going back to those early drums. The drum is the instrument of preference for shamans and healers worldwide. The only musical instrument older than a drum, is the human voice. Even before there were physical objects on which to create rhythm, the human body itself served as a drum.”

“Because the drumbeat is where our lives begin,” Schulz says, “people are innately drawn to it,

and have an innate understanding of the magic, because it’s always been there.” In his travels, Schulz says even he often meets those who didn’t realize they wanted a drum – until they do.”

“People will say, ‘I hadn’t planned on buying a drum today,’ and walk in, pick one up, and take it home with them.”

The rhythm of creation

All five elements are present in the process of creating a drum, Don notes. “Earth: All the components comes from there. Water: The hides are soaked in water to make them pliable. Fire: Heat and evaporation take the water out of the hides and stiffen them. Air is sound the

drum makes.” He continues: “Spirit: You can’t control perfectly what every drum will do. It is a wet medium that has to dry to get to a final point. You get it to the best you can and offer it to the spirits to finish it for you.”

Each drum is unique because – in addition to the human factor – the sound of a

drum depends on so many factors, including the season in which it was made as well as the season in which the animal was died, because an animal’s fat content changes with the seasons.

“You can’t control all of that,” Don muses, “You can only do it the best you can, and let things take their course. By letting Spirit come in and put Their thumbprint on it, you’re letting the magic simply happen. You give it the push, but the wagon ride is up to whatever’s going on.”

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All of these factors together means that no two handmade drums are alike. Each is quite literally ‘a different drum,’ hence the name of his business.

Embracing that randomness is part of the drum making experience, he says. “The experience of making a drum transports us back to that primal point where we have no control over anything.” Although most of us believe we’re in control of our lives, earlier humans didn’t share in that illusion.

“Making drums takes you back to relinquishing control, which, 50,000 years ago, would be totally normal.”

At his workbench, Don brings a pre-soaked hide, already cut in a circle, with hole pre-punched in precise places. He has a long pre-soaked lace cut from the same hide, and a wooden hoop. As he begins, his skillful hands quickly guide and glide the lace through the holes. The handle is created by looping the lace over and over through the center where the lacing crosses. He has made so many drums over his decade of craftsmanship that he can now make a basic drum in about ten minutes. But, even to a master drummer, the results aren’t guaranteed.

“You can’t expect perfection,” he advises. “We expect to be perfect at everything we do, so we stop trying to do a lot of things because we’re afraid we won’t be perfect at it.”

Just let go and create. “You don’t know what’s going to happen. Rather than put your stamp on everything, let life put its stamp on you. It’s going to anyway, and drums are the ultimate example.”

Just beat it

Besides those who are intimidated about drum making, there are others who are hesitant about drumming itself.

“Those who say they can’t drum – that’s my favorite person to teach in the world,” he says, emphasizing that we all innately know how to drum, until we’re discouraged not to. “Kids bang on things. If you hand a four-year-old a drum, they know exactly what to do with it.



“Bottom line,” he says, “it’s all about connecting to rhythm, whether intuitively (from the heart,) or as a percussionist, (thinking rhythmically from the head.)” Don acknowledges that yes, there is a small portion of the population that struggles to find a sense of rhythm. He reframes those folks as having “an odd internal time signature that it’s almost impossible to create.”

Should those people join one of his drum circles?

“Absolutely! If you get lost, find me, watch me. Just look for the big stick in the room.” That big stick is perfect for his huge mother drum, which he uses to begin a rhythm for leading his drum circles.

A personal, magical tool

Schulz says his own magical development was guided by drumming. “I was a toddler stumbling along through the magical dark until I found drums. I didn’t understand what magic was all about until I started playing drums.”

Learning to make his own drums propelled his magical development. “The best magical tools are those you make yourself,”

he notes. “You are the energy behind the tool. You’ve put your blood, sweat, tears, and energy into the piece. As a result, it’s going to work best with the maker. That’s the best tool of all. You build it to fit your hand, length of your arm, to make it work best for you. For you it’s the right tool.”

“Everything centers around the drum,” Don concludes. “Drums are the central point of my cosmology. There’s a rhythm in every part of the drum making process – cutting, punching, stringing the lace – and

even in the world at large. Drums connect us to the Divine, and to our ancestors, as well,” he adds.

“Nothing in the magical tool bag connects us to the ancestors like drumming. At least one of our ancestors played a drum, and their ancestors played a drum, and their ancestors played a drum. It is magic on a molecular level. All they ask is that you play. Just play. Don’t take yourself so damn seriously.” ♦

For more information on Don and his work, visit www.thedifferentdrum.net, find him on Facebook and Etsy, email drummer@thedifferentdrum.net or call 916-835-1863.