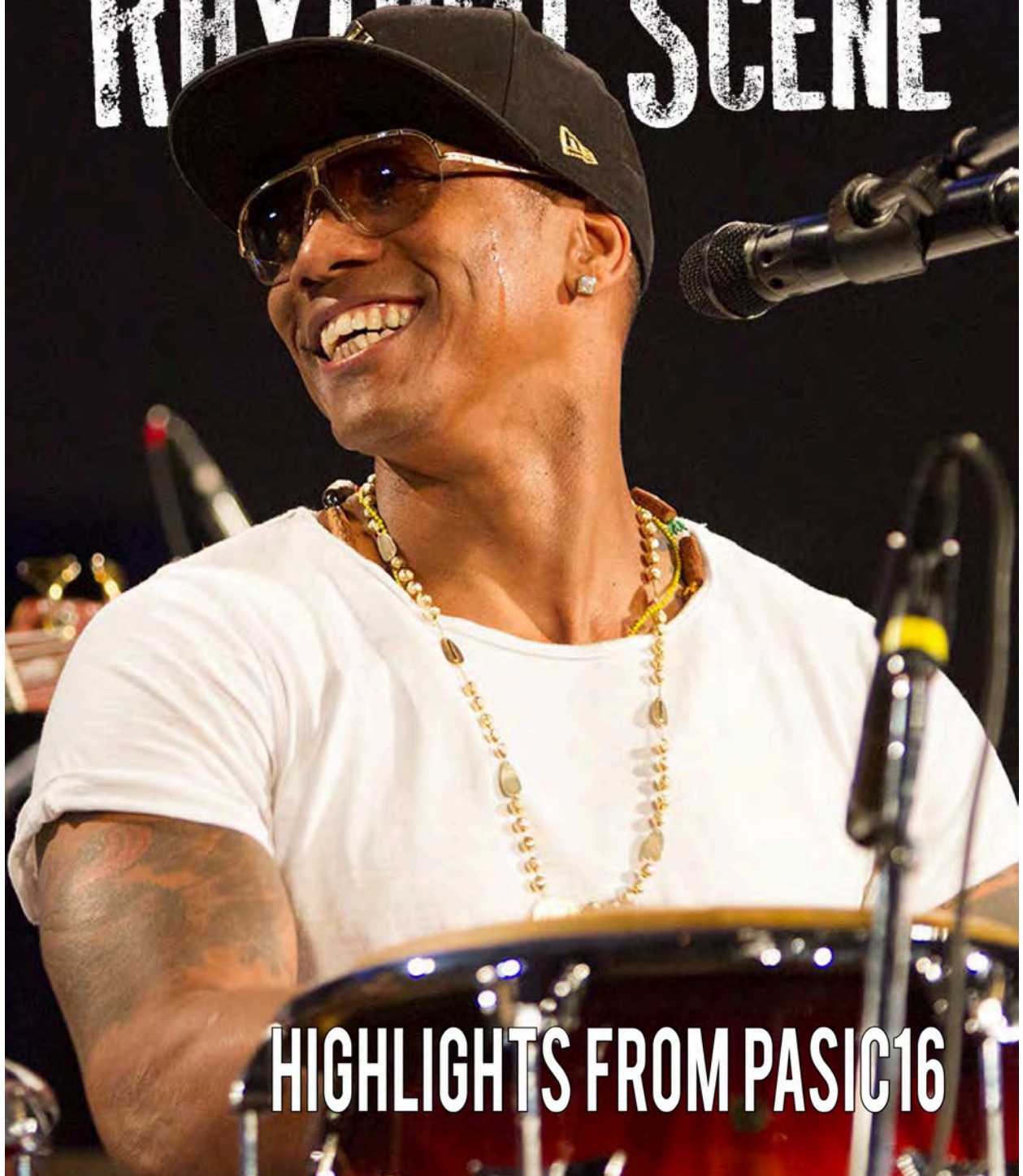


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RHYTHM SCENE™



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RHYTHM! SCENE™

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THE PULSE OF WORLD MUSIC: FONTOMFROM DRUMMING FOR DRUMSET

BY ROYAL HARTIGAN

One focus of my performance and research is the connection of jazz as an African American art form to its West African origins—specifically, the music, dance, and culture of people living in villages and expressing their beliefs, history, and values through the music of drums, bells, and rattles and the movements of dance intimately connected to those sounds.¹



Practicing Fontomfrom drumming with Ernest Domfeh

During my J. William Fulbright service in Ghana, West Africa, I brought my *blood drum spirit* ensemble to Ghana in January 2015 to make music with traditional dance drumming ensembles in villages across the country. Since each of our members had studied and played with Ghanaian master artists here in the U.S. for decades and I had visited Ghana many times since 1991, we had some background and had composed pieces based on the rhythmic foundation of drum ensemble patterns and song melodies.²

One city we stayed in was Kumase, the capitol of the Asante region in central western Ghana. Through my friendship with Adumhene (chief of Adum, a Kumase district), Nana Baffour



Rehearsing Fontomfrom with the Amamreso Agofomma ensemble at the Kumase Centre for National Culture

Agyei Kesse IV, who is an ardent jazz fan, and Daniel Annan Sackey, artistic director at the Centre for National Culture, we were able to arrange for our group to rehearse and perform with the Amamreso Agofomma Music and Dance Ensemble at the Akwasidae Festival, held every six weeks, at the Manhyia Palace (pronounced mahn-shee-ah), home of the Asantehene (paramount chief of the Asante people), Otumfo Osei Tutu II. This was an incredible honor for us, as I had played with the Centre's group there before and was impressed with the seriousness and intensity of the festival events. Akwasidae is an all-day festival that includes numerous regional dance-drumming ensembles, playing during ceremonies and tributes to the Asantehene.

There is a rich musical tradition in Ghana and I could feel the power and depth of the culture through the drumming and dances, parallel to what I experience playing in a jazz ensemble in the styles of Duke Ellington, Charles Parker, John Coltrane, Sun Ra, or Cecil Taylor. In my studies with drumset legends Clifford Jarvis, Max Roach, and Edward Blackwell, we often talked about and worked on a musical approach that connected the feel and rhythmic drive of African music with that found in jazz.

Max and Edward told me about their trips to West Africa and the way they heard drumset sounds as parallel to some ensemble voices, with low-, medium-, and high-pitched tones coming together to express a unified statement, just as traditional ensemble music does. They emphasized that playing the drumset has an essential tonal and timbre quality, creating a feel that is more than a sequence of strokes. I found this quality in the traditional instrumental music of Ghanaian ensembles.³

Our *blood drum spirit* ensemble began a journey to meet people and play in various locales in January 2015—villages, cities, markets, Manhyia palace, the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, and the Centre for National Culture in Kumase, as well as the W. E. B. DuBois Centre, American Embassy, Jazz Club +233, Alliance Francaise, and University of Ghana in the greater Accra area. The performances were recorded by Rev. Martin Adi-Dako, Simon Asamoah and Ben Cohn, a U.S. Fulbright MTV award-ee.

Our performance at Manhyia Palace for Akwasidae included straight-ahead jazz and some original compositions in time cycles of 11 and 15 pulses,

which were well received, but the main theme was connecting our music with the Amamreso Agofomma drum ensemble, led by Erik Owusu. On that day they played the Asante royal court dance drumming known as Fontomfrom (pron. Fahn-tahm-fram). With the permission of the Otumfo Osei Tutu II, we performed and recorded three of the four sections of this music inside his palace area with his family, many chiefs, and other officials in attendance. It was a transcendent experience, with people listening and watching the musical and personal connections we made while soloing and interacting with the musicians of the Amamreso Agofomma ensemble.⁴

The Fontomfrom ensemble includes two large, hollow, deep toned *dawuro* bells played with thick wooden sticks. Two slender higher-pitched *agyegyewa* drums played with medium or thin sticks add a higher-pitched voice to the ensemble. Two hourglass-shaped, double headed, string-tension drums known as *donno* receive strokes from a curved wooden stick, and with changes in arm and finger pressure, can create a variety of low, medium, and high tones. Two *atumpan* master drums, resting on a stand, are played with V-shaped sticks sometimes called *kotakra*. Both *donno* and *atumpan* are referred to as talking drums due to their ability to express a variety of tones that can reflect the tones of local languages. Two huge single-headed *bomaa* drums complete the ensemble, and are also played with *kotakra*.

We will focus on the section of Fontomfrom known as *Atopiretia*. This music can be played for funerals, in times of war, or at state ceremonies, and is often played when the chief rides on a palanquin. If the chief dances, he holds a sword in his left hand and a gun in his right hand, moving to the right and left in time with the drum rhythms.

The *dawuro* bells play a three-stroke timeline in unison, creating a triple feel that can be expressed in 12/8 time in western notation, with dotted quarters as the main beat. The *agyegyewa* drums also speak in unison in a

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repeating four-stroke pattern to solidify the groove. Donno plays a series of variations that mirror the *agyegyewa* voice and accompanies changes in *atumpan* and *bomaa* rhythms.⁵

Atumpan and *bomaa* engage in a conversation: three *bomaa* sounds are answered by *atumpan*'s four-stroke pattern (both above and at letter A below). An *atumpan* variation expresses the Twi language words *Ya kye ɔ di ku ru* (We catch landowner), signifying penalties imposed by a chief for someone misusing the village land they are responsible for.⁶

Atopiretia music includes a sequence of rhythms and dance movements that are cued by *atumpan* or the lower-pitched *bomaa*. The sequence moves from the basic pattern to a repeating *bomaa* phrase that spans

three dotted-quarter main beats while the higher-pitched *atumpan* strikes on the third partial of each beat (letter B). This continues until the *bomaa* states a two-stroke motive on the first and second partial of each beat answered by an *atumpan* four-stroke response parallel to its basic pattern notations (letter C). The final rhythmic pattern (letter D) is initiated by *bomaa*'s roll and a series of *bomaa* phrases that resolve to the basic pattern. This sequence may be repeated as the dance and feeling require.

Tap here for Atopiretia Rhythmic Sequence Drum Ensemble and Drumset

One way to adapt these rhythms for drumset is to bring the *dawuro* timeline to the cymbal, the deeper *bomaa* voice to the bass drum, and the *atumpan* tones to the toms or snare. |

added another layer of time with hi-hat, sounding a series of equal foot strokes in a six-beat feel, coinciding with dotted quarter main beats 2 and 4 in the notated 12/8 time cycle. The basic bomaa-atumpan conversation is expressed here between bass drum and mounted tom.

The cued sequence of Atopiretia dance drumming rhythms can be expressed with the same drumset voices. The continuous hi-hat foot sounds bring another texture, while the cymbal three-stroke groove keeps a timeline in the same way as the original dawuro bell. Each successive bomaa-atumpan conversation between bass drum and mounted tom creates a new feel before a return to the basic patterns.

Tap here for Fontomfrom Atopiretia Drumset

Atopiretia can also be reflected in a jazz style with a swing feel on cymbal and hi-hat and the bomaa-atumpan conversation adapted among bass drum, snare, floor and mounted toms. The original Fontomfrom low, medium, and high drum tones are adapted to different parts of the drumset, and each part of the sequence is extended with improvisations launching from the basic patterns. Observe the basic and jazz versions and see the relationship between the original Fontomfrom drumming and its jazz extension.

Tap here for Fontomfrom Atopiretia Drumset Groove

Our blood drum spirit jazz ensemble listened to the atumpan/bomaa voices and varied our improvisations to relate to the Atopiretia basic conversation and rhythmic sequence. While there are many ways to hear the Atopiretia ensemble and West African rhythms in general, we felt the basic groove to start with the three low bomaa strokes in dialogue with the atumpan response.

Tap here for Fontomfrom Atopiretia Saxophone Solo

Our playing focused on this phrasing and we also interacted with the drummers through the sequence of rhythms, each time returning to the

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D.C.

basic dialogue. After one cued rhythmic sequence, Eric Owusu asked me to solo over the groove.

Tap here for Atopiretia Rhythmic Sequence

Another way to adapt the Fontomfrom Atopiretia sounds to drumset is to play the atumpan patterns on the hourglass donno drum in conversation with the bomaa phrases on bass drum:

Tap here:

This version divides the bomaa voice between bass drum and donno in the final part of the sequence (letter D):

Tap here:

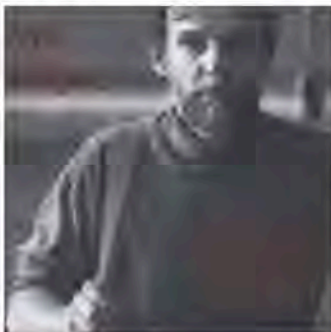
Listen to this extended improvisation with bass drum, donno, and hi-hat based on atopiretia bomaa and atumpan conversations. These drumset variations work in a solo setting, in

dialogue with a soloist, or intense ensemble interactions.

Tap here:

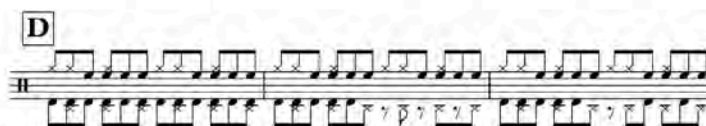
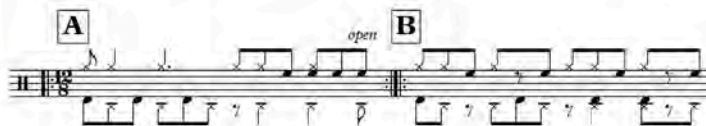
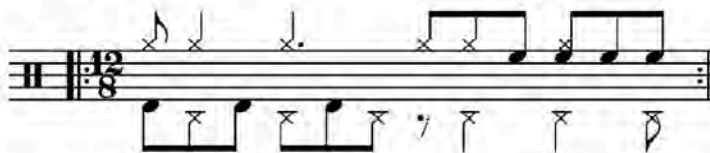
This connection across time and space between people and cultures through music is a focus of my work as a performer and scholar. The history and depth of both African and African American traditions, intimately related by an aesthetic of communal participation, personal improvisation, and intense interaction as a means to spiritual transcendence can be heard in the music of the Asante people and the global jazz community. Our work is a beginning toward a fuller understanding and connection among the musicians, dancers, and peoples of West Africa, America, and the world. The beauty of these traditions is that while expres-

sions are rooted in culture, they also express a freedom and personal way of being that are universal and unite us all.



ENDNOTES

1. My study of Asante Fontomfrom music has been with master artist Emmanuel Atta Poku, who was teaching in the U. S. during our Ghana tour. I also had the guidance of master artist Erik Owusu, and the drummers of the *Amamreso Agofofomma* Music and Dance Ensemble. I learned the Fontomfrom background and drumming from Mr. Poku through lessons, playing together, and observing his artistry and that of Mr. Owusu and the ensemble members. Lessons with Mr. Poku took place between November 2013 and July 2015 in Kumase, Ghana.
2. Members of my *blood drum spirit* quartet, bassist Wes Brown, saxophonist David Bindman, and pianist Art Hirahara, had performed with many Ghanaian teachers in the U. S., including Freeman Kwadzo Donkor, Abraham Kobena Adzenyah, Godwin Kwasi Agbeli, C. K. Ladzekpo, Kwabena Boateng, Martin Kwaakye Obeng, Sarah Thompson, and Aziz Botchway, among others.
3. I studied with Clifford Jarvis in Pittsfield, MA, in summer 1973, and 1977-78; Max Roach at UMass Amherst 1973-74, and Edward Blackwell at Wesleyan University (CT) 1981-86.
4. The members of the Centre for National Culture's *Amamreso Agofofomma* Music and Dance Ensemble that we worked with are as follows: Eric Owusu, Ernest Domfeh, Linda Osei Pokuaah, Martha Amankwah, John Kofi Boame, Osei Kwabena, Isaac Opoku, Osei Akoto, Samuel Aboagye, Mercy Ansere, Edwin K. Bonsu, Philip Owusu



D.C

Agyemang, Bismark Assuming, and Elvis Opoku Dwumfor. The ensemble's artistic director is Daniel Annan Sackey, and the Cultural Centre's director at the time was the late Dr. Samuel Francis Agyei.

5. In my lessons and our playing together, Atta Poku suggested that the timing and placement of the bell reflect dancers' foot movements and that the two-stroke bell motive can be heard as the point of emphasis and beginning of the pattern for notation purposes.

6. Atta Poku taught me this rhythm and meaning in a lesson, July 2015.

ARTISTS

- Emmanuel Atta Poku, interviews and lessons, Kumase, Ghana, West Africa, November 2013-July 2015.
- Kwabena Boateng, interviews, North Dartmouth, U.S., September 2015-April 2016.
- Eric Owusu, Kumase, Ghana, 2014-15.
- Clifford Jarvis Pittsfield, Mass., summer 1973, and 1977-78.

Max Roach, Amherst, Mass., 1973–74.
Edward Blackwell, Middletown, Conn., 1981–86.

VIDEO AND PHOTO CREDITS

Rev. Martin Adi-Dako, Simon Asamoah, and Ben Cohn

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Royal Hartigan is a percussionist, pianist, and tap dancer who has studied and performed the musics of Asia, Africa, Europe, West Asia, and the Americas. He has received many awards for global research, performance, and teaching and is a professor in world music at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth. [RIS](#)