

Mickey Hart

Still Drumming at the Edge of Magic

“Amazing, gratifying, humbling,” is how Mickey Hart describes the experience of joining the ranks of the PAS Hall of Fame. “Being with all the greats—Tito [Puente], Baba [Olatunji], Buddy Rich, Gene Krupa, Louis Bellson. These are my teachers, my mentors, the brother and sisterhood. I ride on the shoulders of giants,” he says with surest conviction. “It’s what came before you that makes you what you are. All those legends that came before me motivated me to continue and continue and continue.”



By **B. Michael Williams**



Mickey Hart could have been content being a rock star. For nearly thirty years, he was a driving force behind the Grateful Dead. The group was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1994.

Throughout his tenure with the Dead, and even in his earliest formative years, Hart traveled his own path, fueled by an indescribably powerful need to connect with the drumming ancestry shared by all percussionists.

In his book *Drumming at the Edge of Magic*, Hart describes his nearly fanatical timeline of information pertaining to percussion instruments from around the globe. Made up of index cards and photographs, the timeline grew to over sixty feet long, meandering along the walls of The Barn (which housed a recording studio, among other attractions) at his northern California home. Mickey called it his Anaconda (with a capital A). Researching the world of this latest PAS Hall of Fame inductee, I discovered another Anaconda: a complex and driven drummer, scholar, author, composer, recording artist, entertainer, archivist, activist, and perennial student named Mickey Hart.

Born September 11, 1943, Mickey received a public-school music education grounded in rudimental drumming. “My father was a drummer,” says Hart in *Drumming at the Edge of Magic*, “my mother, too. They were rudimental drummers, which means they practiced a type of drumming that evolved out of a military tradition.”

It seems prophetic that the young man would grow to beat his swords into the plowshares of drumming for health, healing, and love. In 1991, he appeared before the U.S. Senate Committee on Aging, speaking on behalf of the healing value of drumming and rhythm to afflictions associated with aging. A member of the Board of Directors of the Institute for Music and Neurologic Function, he received that institution’s 2003 Music Has Power Award, in recognition of his advocacy and commitment to raising public awareness of the positive effects of music.

The author of four books, Hart published his seminal *Drumming at the Edge of Magic: A Journey into the Spirit of Percussion* in 1990, followed by *Planet Drum* in 1991. The companion CD, also titled *Planet Drum*, featuring Hart with a host of world-class percussionists, sat at the number-one position on the *Billboard* World Music Chart for 26 weeks and won the first-ever Grammy Award for Best World Music Album in 1991. Fittingly, Hart won another Grammy this year, taking the 2009 Best Contemporary World Music Album award for *Global Drum Project* with Zakir Hussain, Sikiru Adepaju, Giovanni Hidalgo, and computer sound wizard Jonah Sharp. Mickey says he is

already in the planning stages for *Global Drum Project II*, so stay tuned!

Hart’s enthusiasm for world percussion was a natural outgrowth of his collaboration with fellow Grateful Dead drummer Bill Kreutzmann. Every concert included a half-hour drum extravaganza by the duo dubbed the “Rhythm Devils.” These extended percussion experiences (one cannot call them simply “drum solos”) introduced countless audiences (known affectionately as “Dead Heads”) to an ever-expanding collection of percussion instruments from every corner of the globe and fueled Hart’s curiosity and passion for learning all he could about the origin of his instruments.

Hart composed music for Francis Ford Coppola’s blockbuster film *Apocalypse Now* in 1980. He recalls, “Francis came to see one of the [Grateful Dead] shows at Winterland, and he wanted his movie to sound like the Rhythm Devils, so he asked me to compose the percussion score. I built special instruments for the air strike scene and literally played the whole movie. Francis put the film on a loop and played it over and over while we put the music to it. It was more than fun!”

Since then, Hart has composed scores, soundtracks, and themes for movies and television. In 1996, he was invited to compose music for the opening ceremony of the 26th Summer Olympiad in Atlanta. He remembers, “They had my book, *Planet Drum*, and they said, ‘This is what the Olympics are all about. It’s a gathering of tribes and rhythm. We want to put that spirit into the opening ceremony. We’d like you to compose the first ten minutes for percussion.’” Hart composed the piece for more than 100 percussionists playing dozens of instruments from six continents to create “sounds of the Olympic spirits and tribes.”

As a Trustee of the American Folklife Center of the Library of Congress, Hart is deeply invested in the Endangered Music Project to preserve the library’s vast collection of sound recordings. “We’ve made lots of progress in identifying rare and endangered collections,” he said. “The materials on which these great recordings were imprinted—wax, tin, acetate, magnetic tape—are deteriorating. Our goal is to transfer them into a digital medium before they are no longer retrievable. The Library of Congress houses the largest repository of indigenous music in the world, and the money raised from the sale of these recordings goes back into the culture, so it’s an important project. The other challenge is to allow access to people. Some of the music is now available on the Internet at the website of the American Folklife Center [www.loc.gov/folklife]. Preservation and access, those are the two challenges.”

Hart is also on the Board of Directors of the Smithsonian’s American Recorded Sound Project. “The Smithsonian has the entire Folk-

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ways record catalog—over 3,000 LPs,” he said. “We’re in the process of converting all of them into digital media.” In 1999, the Saybrook Graduate School and Research Center in San Francisco awarded Hart an Honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters for his work in advancing the preservation of aural archives.

Hart credits Babatunde Olatunji with inspiring his quest into world percussion. “He was a pioneer; he set the example,” Mickey remembers. “When I heard *Drums of Passion*, Nigerian rhythms mixed with city sounds, it put me on a whole other path of exploring the world’s rhythms. These were sacred rhythmic signatures. The talking drum sound from that first record was riveting. It opened a whole new world. Baba brought ritual trance music to the West. He gave me a rhythmic life that was invaluable. I can never repay him.”

Asked about how he got so deeply involved with music and healing, Hart responded, “Almost thirty years ago, my grandmother was suffering from Alzheimer’s. She was in the advanced stages and hadn’t spoken in quite some time. I visited her and brought a drum to play for her and was astonished when she said my name! Rhythm connects people with the resonance of the universe. It’s all about vibrations. We’re now finding out what parts of the brain light up when we’re ‘on music,’ and it’s incredibly exciting. For me, it’s very personal. Watching my grandmother respond so positively to sound and rhythm was a turning point.”

In his 1991 address to the U.S. Senate Committee on Aging, Hart said, “What is true of our own bodies is true almost everywhere we look. We are embedded within a rhythmical universe. Everywhere we see rhythm, patterns moving through time. It is there in the cycles of the seasons, in the migration of birds and animals, in the fruiting and withering of plants, and in the birth, maturation, and death of ourselves. Rhythm is at the very center of our lives. By acknowledging this fact and acting on it, our potential for preventing illness and maintaining mental, physical, and spiritual well-being is far greater.”

Hart went on to suggest that forming therapeutic drumming activities for the elderly should be an integral part of any music therapy program. "The object is not public performance," he said. "Because, when we speak of this type of drumming, we are speaking of a deeper realm in which there is no better or worse, no modern or primitive, no distinctions at all, but rather an almost organic compulsion to translate the emotional fact of being alive into sound, into rhythm, into something you can dance to."

Rudimental drummer, author, composer, archivist, activist for the healing capacity of music, percussive Renaissance Man (not to

mention rock star), Mickey Hart has given of himself to his community. And his community reaches the world over. In *Drumming at the Edge of Magic*, Mickey quotes an African proverb, "A village without music is a dead place." Thanks to the passion of this Grateful Dead drummer, our percussive world is very much alive. "In the beginning was noise," he wrote, "and noise begat rhythm, and rhythm begat everything else. When the rhythm is right you feel it with all your senses. The head of the drum vibrates as the stick strikes it. The physical feedback is almost instantaneous, rushing along your arms, filling your ears.

"Your mind is turned off, your judgment

wholly emotional. Your emotions seem to stream down your arms and legs and out the mouth of the drum; you feel light, gravity-less, your arms feel like feathers.

"You fly like a bird."

Books by Mickey Hart

- Drumming at the Edge of Magic: A Journey into the Spirit of Percussion*, Harper Collins, 1990
Planet Drum, Harper Collins, 1991
Spirit into Sound: The Magic of Music, Grateful Dead Books, 1999
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Mickey Hart Discography

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The Apocalypse Now Sessions: The Rhythm Devils Play River Music, Passport Records, 1979 (Re-released on Rykodisc, 1990)
Yamantaka, Celestial Harmonies Records, 1983 (re-released 1992)
At the Edge, Rykodisc, 1990
Music to Be Born By, Rykodisc, 1990
Däfos, Rykodisc, 1990
Planet Drum, Rykodisc, 1991 (Re-released on Shout! Factory Records, 2008) [1991 Grammy winner, Best World Music Album]
Mickey Hart's Mystery Box, Rykodisc, 1996 (re-released on Shout! Factory Records, 2008)
Superlingua, Rykodisc, 1998 (re-released on Shout! Factory Records, 2008)
Spirit into Sound, Arista Records, 2000
The Best of Mickey Hart: Over the Edge and Back, Rykodisc, 2002
The Rhythm Devils Concert Experience, RED Distribution DVD, 2009
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For Further Reading

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 Ward, Eric, "Mickey Hart: Rhythmic Science," © 2006 Glide Magazine (at www.glide magazine.com/articles/51460/mickey-hart-rhythmic-science.html).

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