

The life long study of percussion has been a passion that I have perused for over 40 years. In July 2009 I had the pleasure of traveling to one of our world meccas of drumming, Brazil. As always, while on tour I collect a suitcase of instruments, artefacts, stories and interviews. On this tour I spent some time in the mecca of Afro Brazilian Percussion; the city Salvador in the state Bahia. Armed with a video recorder note pad, camera and open heart I knocked on the door of Casa Olodum, the undisputed centre of the universe for the drumming tradition Samba Reggae.

Olodum's (pronounced oh-lo-doon) name is derived from the Yoruba deity Olodumaré (interesting strong connection to the Bata drumming I just witnessed in Cuba!).

... "Olodum is an internationally acclaimed Afro-Brazilian cultural group from Bahia, Brazil; was founded in 1979 as a "Bloco Afro" (African Bloc), a Bahian Carnival association highlighting African heritage and black pride through music, dance theatre, and art. From their home city of Salvador da Bahia in Northeast Brazil (often described as the most African city in the Americas), Olodum has dedicated itself to cultural activism in the struggle against racial discrimination and socioeconomic inequality"...

... "They focus their yearly Carnival themes on controversial issues such as black power and socialist movements in Africa and the African Diaspora. In the mid 1980s, the head drummer in the group - Mestre Nequinho do Samba - experimented with Afro-Caribbean rhythms and mixed them with the Brazilian samba. He divided the large Surdo bass drums into four interlocking parts and layered the high-pitched Repinique



INSIDE CASA OLODUM

By Gary France

drums in additive rhythms on top. The result was a new style of music dubbed Samba Reggae that quickly dominated Bahian Carnival. In the late 1980s Olodum assumed premiere position among the Blocos Afro in Bahia and became internationally known. They formed a professional musical band Banda Olodum which has now recorded over ten CDs. Olodum musicians have worked with international luminaries such as Michael Jackson, Paul Simon, and Spike Lee."¹

After a wonderful morning walk through the Polourinho, the historic centre of Salvador famous for its Portuguese colonial architecture, (a city within a city), I was greeted by Mr Nelson Mendes, Cultural Coordinator of the internationally known "Bloco Afro Olodum" of Salvador, Bahia, Brazil. At the time of our interview Mr Mendes had worked with Olodum for over a decade, his job included developing projects and communication between Olodum and other Afro-Brazilian institutions in Bahia, as well as other national and international organizations.

Thank you for your invitation to your concert last evening and for escorting me on this wonderful tour of Casa Olodum. Last evenings ensemble was absolutely fantastic, so full of energy and passion. Is it true this was just the training ensemble?

Yes, at this moment, our main ensemble is on tour. They are playing in Portugal, Spain, Italy, Germany France and England. This band is comprised of 10 percussionists, one bass, one keyboard, guitar and singers.

Originally started as a stand-alone percussion ensemble, the group identified a need to amplify the groups' personality by adding a rhythm section.

Would you please tell me about the history of Samba Reggae?

Samba through the 1980's (samba batucada and



Gary & Nelson



Nelson Mendes

reggae, the music of Jamaica) fused to unite the black community. Musicians such as Bob Marley Jimmy Cliff, Peter Tosh, influenced our style very much. We have even recorded with Jimmy Cliff!

How do students learn to play the drums in Olodum?

The learning is informal, we teach the students in a folkloric tradition (through listening and imitation). We also have an educational project that supports the community where students of all backgrounds regardless of their financial situation can learn and participate in music. Children from the surrounding neighbourhoods as well as other parts of Salvador can participate in our school " Escola Olodum", where we teach percussion and Afro Dance. The student's study 1/2 of there regular subjects (math literature etc.) in a state School, and spend 1/2 time of their time on music with Olodum. Students are tested to find the most appropriate instrument whether it be a Surdo, Caccia, Ripinique - they have classes in percussion, African culture and heritage - seminars about our religion and history. There is no charge for tuition and we pay all expenses from sponsorship including transportation, food, etc. as many of our students are from poor socio-economic backgrounds (favelas). Students range from ages 7 - 18, at the present time we have 300 children studying with us here at Cassa Olodum.

I note that you also have singers with the group?

Yes, we do have singers, for them we arrange for special training, even the adults receive training.

How are you funded?

We are currently sponsored by Petrobrass the oil company. When this group finishes we will have a new group, our support is annual.

What happens to the students when they finish, are there opportunities to continue study and performance?

After the course they may be selected for one



of our performing ensembles. The age of our professional ensemble is 19 and up, there is no age limit on the professional group. Members may then play in "Bloco Afro" our major cultural Carnival event. Our main educational focus is on the final performances in the Olodum Music festival. We have two categories in the festival: Poetry Samba for composed lyrics about topics like

racism, declarations of love, everything, it is free and the festival Samba theme that is decided each year. For example, next years theme is honouring South Africa.

Speaking of South Africa, I notice on your wall you have photos of Nelson Mandela - I had the honour of playing for him just a few years ago it was a real thrill!

Yes, we are today in the Nelson Mandela Auditorium! We use this room for meetings, lectures, meeting the community etc.

Has Nelson Mandela visited Olodum?

Yes, of course, he came here before his election. As you can see there are posters all around the room commemorating his visit. Now, back to the festival... we select the participants with a special panel of judges including journalists, writers etc. The participants perform and compete on a big stage in the Polourinho over 3 days with performances presentations and awards.

Olodum has recorded with many international artists, would you please tell me about this?

Olodum has worked on projects and recorded with Michael Jackson, Paul Simon, Gilberto Gil, Caetano Veloso, Spike Lee to name a few.

Michael Jackson invited Spike Lee to produce a video clip in 1996 with Olodum (200 percussionist) with Michael dancing. The track is titled "They Don't Care About Us" (check it out on YouTube!). This song is about the discrimination and injustice. We have also recorded and worked with Paul Simon on his *Rhythm of the Saints* album, as well as Herbie Hancock, Wayne Shorter and Sadao Watanabe who actually started an Olodum style educational program in Japan.

What would be the most important message you would like to send to our readers about Olodum?

Olodum would like to present the idea of presenting percussion as a vehicle to support a message of peace and to show to the world that it is possible to come together fight for our disabilities.

That is a very special goal. I will keep the tour message close to my heart. I would like to thank to for taking the time to speak with me today and wish yourself and Cassa Olodum a future of joy and prosperity.

1 About Olodum <http://www.narin.com/olodum/>

THE DRUM SHOP N/C