

September 14, 2008

## Banging on a Drum as a Way of Life

By [TAMMY LA GORCE](#)

ROCKAWAY

THERE are those who say you can't re-create the past. Then there are those who attend Richard Reiter's drum circles.

Mr. Reiter, 61, of Cedar Grove, has been hoisting his collection of 60 djembe and other African drums to locations across [New Jersey](#) since 2000. The participants vary, too: when he is not drumming in one of his regular spots, including the Outpost in the Burbs in Montclair, Puffin Cultural Forum in Teaneck or Rest Stop Rejuvenate in Rockaway, he is leading "team-building" circles for businesses and other groups. But mostly, the ambience is the same: to attend one of Mr. Reiter's drum circles is to step into 1967.

"When I'm doing this I feel like I'm back in the late '60s, like it's the summer of love," Mr. Reiter said last month before a weekend circle at Rest Stop Rejuvenate. "There's that spirit again, that community, but without the drugs."

The look is the same too, give or take a few bald spots. Among the 18 mostly 50-something first-time and experienced drummers — 10 men and 8 women — who paid \$10 to attend the Rockaway circle, tattoos, long hair, bandanas and bare feet were the predominant fashion statements. And, in a scene worthy of a film crew, once the rhythm in the incense-scented space reached a level of contagion, a woman in a flowing ankle-length skirt twirled, trancelike, through the room.

Mr. Reiter, a professional musician who played saxophone with luminaries including [Tony Bennett](#) and [Frank Sinatra](#) in the 1970s and won an Emmy in 1979 for his score to the documentary "Generation on the Wind," learned to drum during a trip to Senegal in 1999. Nostalgia for the '60s, he said, is not a prerequisite for joining his circles. For him, the goal is to help percussionists of all ages and talent levels find their rhythm — an inclination honed during eight years teaching band to middle-school students at Montclair Kimberley Academy in the 1990s.

If they find the flower child within them along the way, Mr. Reiter said, it's just a pleasant bonus.

"I'm coming at it as a person who likes music, who likes to drum," Mr. Reiter said. "I've done some spiritual things and some meditation, but my plan was only, 'Let's make music, it'll be fun.'"

In eight years, the fun has gripped enough would-be drummers to let Mr. Reiter, a father of two grown children who is married to Susan Reiter, the director of student services at Montclair Kimberley, make a full-time profession of circle-leading.

He has organized staff members of the [New Jersey Symphony Orchestra](#), the Manhattan-based Ad Council

and the Somerset County Library System into circles, among dozens of other organizations.

Mr. Reiter also performs with the Richard Reiter Swing Band, a five-piece group formed 20 years ago in which he plays saxophone and clarinet, and the Richard Reiter Afro-Jazz Project, a seven-piece band in which he plays flute and saxophone, in addition to writing all the music.

In Rockaway, Mr. Reiter's guidance was calm-voiced and jargon free. "You find a rhythm, and it drives you forward at its own pace," he explained. "There's no rushing, no pressure."

Which is not to say a lot of energy isn't expended. One of the more experienced drummers at the Rockaway circle, 46-year-old Eric Fielo of Linden, sweated enough that he went out to his air-conditioned car to take a break.

First-timer Sandee D'Olivo, 35, of Stanhope, meanwhile, found the musical exertion therapeutic: "There's a lot of stress in my life," she said. "I thought I'd be a better drummer — I'm not very good — but I'm really getting into just pounding on something. It's freeing, like riding a horse. You lose yourself in it."

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