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## “Harmony Is Neverending” A Conversation With Hafiz Shabazz by James Burger

**Hafiz Shabazz** is Director of the World Music Percussion Ensemble and Adjunct Associate Professor of Music at Dartmouth College. Professor Shabazz has performed internationally with numerous jazz legends, lectured at more than 600 schools and universities, and worked extensively with inner city youth and poverty programs. Originally from Philadelphia, he has been at Dartmouth since 1983. Recently, I spoke with him in his office.

*JB: Could you talk a bit about your background?*

**HS:** I got involved with ethnomusicology long before I came to Dartmouth. My father was among the first Caribbeans to emigrate from Jamaica to the United States in 1945. I became interested in how I fit into the American society. My father taught me about African cultures. He introduced me to Calypso music and had a true sense of himself because of the lessons his father taught him. My grandfather was of Cuban and My grandmother was Cherokee. As a result of my father’s lessons and grandmothers was an inspiration, I wanted to know more about my roots. My music and cultural education was an excursion through several different schools in several different countries and islands. I first went to Haiti and studied Voodoo ritual with master drummers. Then to University of Bahia in Salvador, Brazil and studies at the Federal University of Ghana and studied in 1988, I was awarded a research grant from Dartmouth College and traveled to Havana and Matanzas, Cuba. In 1999, I traveled to Mali, with my spiritual brother, master drummer Abdoul Doumbia, to continue my research. I met his family and visited the Dogon people in Bandiagara. My life and research started all over again.



*JB: I was listening to your CD with the world jazz quintet Bala Bala. On the last piece, you play the balifon [African xylophone], and it’s so well constructed in a melodic sense. Have you had a lot of harmony or theory training?*

**HS:** Yes—I did study theory and harmony. I totally, totally love harmony! Harmony is one of those things that is neverending. Western and Eastern harmonies are quite beautiful.

*JB: You’ve studied and played so much abroad. Is there a difference in the role of the musician in other countries?*

**HS:** The role of the drummer in West African societies is a venerable one. In a traditional sense, the master drummers, griots, and praise singers are at an elevated level. They are the repositories of history and tradition. In addition, they are present and participate in all of the various ceremonies, particularly weddings. Musicians are not thought of as entertainers or superstars—they are the foundation and fundamental elements of African society.

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*JB: When I saw the Ensemble at the “Dance of the Small Drums”, I could feel the joy coming from the performers. What’s most fulfilling to you as a teacher, first of all, and how do you know when a student is really “getting it”?*

**HS:** What’s most fulfilling for me as a teacher is when the aspects of culture as well as the musicianship are personified in the student’s final class projects. From the cultural standpoint, I try to impart the consciousness of becoming, if at all possible, a multiculturalist. To understand the importance of how all cultures have contributed to humanity, and that there is humanity within each and every culture. When students acknowledge and respect the course of study as a new paradigm for valuing culture, not simply viewing it as a bunch of drums and rhythms, is when I am successful as a professor.

With my drumming ensemble, I am successful when each of the students realize the importance of performing in an ensemble—that moment when their souls and spirits merge together and a smile comes across their faces.

*JB: What about the attention span or level of concentration in our society?*

**HS:** We have been taught to think and process information in small spans of time. For example, music concerts are one hour and thirty minutes; theatrical performances are two hours. A longer attention span has to be tied to tradition and education. Our educational system has really done our children a disservice by devaluing music as a component of the national educational process.

*JB: I’m struck by the way that you’re expanding the concept of tradition.*

**HS:** Geneticists and archaeologists postulate that over 100,000 years ago, we human beings all came from the same source, Africa. If you subscribe to this purported commonality, it should contribute to our relating to world festivals and world music, whether it is from Africa or Europe. Past and present cultures have retained and presented their history and festivals through the oral tradition. If we agree or not is an altogether different situation. People in the same family don’t always agree on the same thing!

*JB: Do you hear from your past students?*

**HS:** All the time. A student just emailed me—she studied with me five years ago—she was in Venezuela at a carnival and heard rhythms similar to those taught in class. There’s another student who’s out in California studying with a master drummer from Cuba. Yet another student, Ananda Glover, who is from Ghana, now living in California, wrote a book entitled *The Prayer Closet*. He sent me a copy with thanks for my contributing inspiration. That’s how I get my rewards.

*JB: Let me ask you one final question. Can music change the world?*

**HS:** Short answer: yes, it has. We have to actually become culturalists. Music is more than entertainment. We should also be touched and moved by the musicians who create it. We must find ways to support the music and the musicians.