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# Never-Ending Pursuit of Rhythm

BY JULISSA C. VALE

**My name is Julissa Vale**, a native New Yorker born of Puerto Rican emigrants. I do not remember a time in my life when the sound of music was not present. I was raised on Spanish ballads, salsa, and the *Jibaro* music typical of rural Puerto Rico. During the holidays, *bomba* and *plena* were also played at home. The songs played in my household weren't just from Puerto Rico, but from all over Latin America. My father loved the romantic ballads he associated with his idyllic upbringing in provincial Puerto Rico, and his memories enriched my childhood. One of my earliest memories is singing along with my dad as he strummed on his guitar to a Felipe Rodriguez song.

As the oldest child of two hardworking parents, I was taken to a local daycare

center. The Hart Street Daycare Center was administrated by a largely African American contingent of instructors and care providers who introduced me to other musical worlds. I embraced these worlds with as much joy and excitement as I had the music of my home.

My favorite drummers were always Mongo Santamaria, Manny Oquendo, Ray Barretto, Kako, Louie Ramirez, and both Titos. But it wasn't until I heard Archie Delorme's band at New York's SOB's that I knew I wanted to play percussion. I wanted to inspire all that I'd felt that night in an audience of my own. I began studying music theory and percussion with "Mr. Boogaloo Blues," Johnny Colon. I next studied with Jimmy Delgado at Boys and Girls Harbor

Conservatory in Harlem. By the mid-1990s, I was studying Afro-Cuban percussion with John Amira.

My interest in percussion expanded to the drum set. The "kit" led me to one of my mentors, Paula Spiro, and the Female Drummers Workshop. Drummers Collective with Memo Acevedo and Adriano Santos followed shortly after, as well as djembe studies with Michael Markus and timbales with Johnny Almendra. In my never-ending pursuit of rhythm, I studied with New York City-based Afro-Brazilian drummer Dendé Macedo, as well as Mestre Paulinho, Mestre Neco, and Macambira in Bahia, Brazil. When my Puerto Rican roots music, *bomba* and *plena*, called, I looked to the Pleneros de la 21 and Tito Cepeda.

In the late '90s, Ronnie Roc invited me to play with his trio. When jazz drummer Victor Jones called, I joined his Cultur-Versy project, which included Dario Boente, Saul Ruben, and Mino Cinelu. Mr. Jones's and Mr. Cinelu's mentoring paved the way for my sound and exposed me to the world of jazz. They sharpened my performance as a musician, my understanding of melody and dynamics. They also created a desire to refine my understanding of music in a broader sense.

Since then, I have played with New York City-based bands such as Fluid, Purple Crush, Jason-Michael's Tuesday's Child, Ya Está, and Mireya Ramos y Movimiento. My musical journey has led me to venues such as Joe's Pub, CBGB, CBGB's Gallery, Zinc Bar, Trumpets, Cecil's, Smoke, The Cutting Room, Nuyorican Poets Cafe, Town Hall, Symphony Space, and Central Park's Summer Stage. I was featured in 2007 in Emmy Award-winner Jason Samuels Smith's A.C.G.I. show at Sadler's Wells Theatre in London. I'm currently working with Boricua roots music groups Tato Torres and Yerba Buena, Cultur-Versy, and Song and Beat. I teach percussion at the Harbor Charter



Julissa Vale at Camaradas el Barrio, April 2009. Photo: Elaine Eversley



Julissa performing at La Casita at Pregones, August 2010. Photo: David Cajigas



Julissa at Nuyorican Poets Cafe. August 2010. Photo: David Cajigas

School and Exponents, an outpatient drug abuse and HIV/AIDS clinic.

I consider women “the rhythm of life” and believe it’s our inherent right to play percussion. There have been some obstacles—some male drummers refusing to teach women how to play or not allowing us to play specific drums. My optimism persists, despite stereotypes or gender roles assigned by cultural tradition and, in some cases, even religious belief. My mind and heart expanded my own realm of possibilities.

Music is a never-ending journey. In five, ten, and twenty years, I expect to be playing and singing and researching in Haiti, Cuba, Africa, or India. I would really like for music to go back to a time when everyone on the stage was an actual musician, and not just an entertainer accompanying a track or drum machine. As many have noted, “Music is love in search of a word.” My musical journey will end once I find that word. ▼

In this issue, Eileen Condon’s *In Praise of Women* column morphs into something a bit different: a new offering called *First Person*. The new column is a natural outgrowth of the fact that so many of the women Eileen interviewed by e-mail for *In Praise of Women* spontaneously opted to craft their responses as a complete narrative—a story of their own. So rather than continuing to summarize artists’ and cultural workers’ vocation stories, *First Person* creates a space for women—and men—to share stories of their lives and work in folk and traditional arts.

This issue’s *First Person* features Latina drummer and music educator Julissa Vale’s life and career in music, written in response to a series of questions provided by Eileen. *Voices* is proud to present a traditional musician’s tale in her own voice, and we encourage other traditional artists and culture workers to share reflections under this column heading. To share your own story or suggest a colleague to be featured in *First Person*, contact Eileen at [econdon@ctmd.org](mailto:econdon@ctmd.org).

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