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ARTS & PEOPLE

And, on the drums — everybody

Growing enthusiasm for rhythms shows in jam sessions, classes

By Mark DeGostino
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

Randy Armstrong, co-founder of the wildly popular DOAH World Music Ensemble and frequent First Night favorite Unu Mondo, has been a front-row witness to the growing enthusiasm for rhythms and cultures he first started exploring in the 1970s.

"Most of the '90s there has been an explosion of people being interested in drumming," Armstrong says. "I think a lot of it was brought to the forefront by people like Mickey Hart of the Grateful Dead, and people like Babatunde Olatunji — he's one of the grandfathers of the drumming movement."

Armstrong, a world-music specialist who writes music in the jazz idiom and plays the sitar, among other things, teaches youth and adult drumming classes at The Bell Center in Dover. He also has more than 30 drummers under his wing each year at Phillips Exeter Academy, where he collaborates with a guest choreographer for a dance-and-drum concert every May.

His classes, like Benoit's classes, are very different from a drum circle in that there is little to no improvisation allowed. Students learn multiple rhythm patterns, and work on specific traditional "tunes" in the West African tradition — tunes such as "Koukou," from Guinea, and the almost universally known "Fanga," which was popularized by Olatunji.

"I feel that people have a sense of community by playing together," Armstrong says. "Even in this little group, they get together outside of class, and drum."

Some students are trying to get involved in music for the first time, and see drumming as a way in: "I feel rhythm is the basis of music," Armstrong says. "It's where everything comes from."

Some students are dancers or theater people looking for a way to improve their art.

Some students are jazz drummers looking for the roots of all those complex rhythms they play with sticks on a kit.

But however they start, Armstrong says, "it's infectious. It's pretty hard to stop. You go further and further because it just becomes a deeper and deeper experience."