



Susan Horn, director of Emeryville Taiko, instructs her class on rhythm

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Taiko Business is A Resounding Success

—*By Noelle Robbins*

It washes over listeners with the timeless allure of a primal heartbeat. For centuries, its captivating rhythmic power has enthralled audiences of all ages. Observing a performance is to be immersed in a throbbing, irresistible river of pounding musical thunder and stunning visual lightning.

"It" is taiko drumming, and it has not only created a striking, pulsating background for contemporary entertainment from such well-known films as *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon* to Mitsubishi car commercials, but it is also providing a vocation for two trailblazing Bay Area women.

Typically, taiko (which means "big drum") conjures up images of the smooth, rippling muscles of the young Japanese men who have traditionally engaged in this forceful, dynamic musical experience. But Carol Ayers and Susan Horn have helped attract more women to this remarkable physical, emotional, and spiritual activity.

Ayers is director of the San Francisco Women's Drum Troupe, and Horn heads Emeryville Taiko. Both invite women of all ages to realize the myriad benefits and blessings they say taiko drumming offers.

Ayers's taiko odyssey was launched at the Cherry Blossom Parade in San Francisco in the '90s. She was strongly attracted to the taiko rhythms, but noted that the drummers were always Japanese men. Then, according to Ayers, came the revelation.

"For some reason I had an instant love of taiko. The first time I heard it my heart started to pound and all the hair on my arms stood up. I would go every year and finally, on a float, were women!"

Greatly emboldened, Ayers sought out taiko classes and studied traditional drumming for five years before co-creating her own taiko performance group. Sideline by a back injury and deeply concerned that her taiko days were behind her, Ayers took her physical therapist's suggestion that she resume her passion in the capacity of a teacher, sharing and growing the taiko spirit. Thus, in 2000, the San Francisco Women's Drum Troupe was born.

From the start, Ayers has had a very specific vision for her drummers. "While I learned the traditional way, I formed my group in a non-traditional manner, partly because I am not Japanese (and I do not pretend to be), and partly because my teaching style is very different. Our group is small, cooperative, and non-competitive in nature. We welcome all women."

SF Taiko's Diverse Drummers

Drummers are encouraged to be creative and add their input to the mix. The group's mission is to bring its love of taiko to its community and perform mainly for nonprofit organizations.

Ayers' students enthusiastically share her vision and cherish their practice and performance of taiko. Diane Dew, 51, an office manager, has been engrossed in taiko for two and a half years. She says that as an observer, taiko concerts "really grabbed me" but she was worried that she lacked the strength needed for vigorous drumming. To her happy surprise, not only did she discover that she possessed the physical endurance, but she found a new voice, as well. She says, "I am not really loud, usually," and she finds that taiko allows her to express a part of herself not normally revealed. She particularly enjoys the whole body experience, big movements (a great upper-back workout), martial arts stance, and intense focus that taiko requires. She adds that, during her two-hour classes with Ayers, "the rest of the world goes away."

Lori McLaughlin, 42, a real estate appraiser, and Cate Fields, 45, a bookkeeper, echo these sentiments. McLaughlin says, "I always wanted to play drums, but my mom wouldn't let me." She thrives on the group energy and the sense of "being in the sound." Fields finds drumming a great physical release. "The beat is like a heartbeat, basic and clear. It brings you alive, like the heartbeat of a mother." Both agree that Ayers' non-traditional approach is supportive and empowering.

At 36, Kari Alexander is one of the younger members of the group. She especially appreciates the performance aspect of taiko, noting that it possesses all the elements of theater art and is "infectious, very playful."

Taiko as Cancer Therapy

Susan Horn, 51, director of Emeryville Taiko, also came to taiko teaching reluctantly.

Her first exposure to taiko as an observer gave her "goosebumps." She found the experience unforgettable and exhilarating.

One of Horn's young students, Yuki Okanuria-Wong, 12, has been doing taiko for four years. Her mother strongly encouraged her participation as a way to connect with Japanese culture and her heritage. One of the things Yuki appreciates about performing is that there is "some messing up, but no one in the audience knows."

Another of Horn's students, Sharon Anderson, 47, and a single parent, initially found herself becoming a "drum mom versus being a soccer mom" when her child became involved in taiko. Always a watcher, she began to believe that she, too, could learn and perform taiko. Then came her heartbreaking diagnosis of stage 4 cancer. Anderson took a tailspin into full-blown depression, retreating to her bed and weeping for weeks. The lure of her drumming, however, proved to be imperative and life changing.

One of the aspects of taiko that Anderson has always found most appealing is Kai, the summoning up of earth energy through the vocalizations that often accompany taiko practice and performance. Anderson derives profound pleasure from the sensation of pulling penetrating energy from the earth, up through her body and into her bachi, or taiko drumming sticks.

Taiko Business Expands

Ayers views her Taiko group as a manifestation of her passion with a business twist, but admits she is not in it for the money. She currently has 12 performing members and is now offering a new beginner's class which is accepting women through September. Horn has married her Taiko school to her fascination with Japanese animation and operates Emeryville Taiko in conjunction with her store, Kimono My House, which offers Japanese sci-fi toys. Her income from the store and personal sources of investment have allowed Horn to just recently purchase a building in Emeryville to house the Taiko instruction, and will permit an expansion of classes presently serving 60 students.

Common threads and kindred spirits have brought these and other Bay Area women to taiko. Both the San Francisco Women's Drum Troupe and Emeryville Taiko welcome and teach women from the ages of 8 through 80, and all seem to thrill at bringing their message to audiences, sweeping their listeners up in the surging power and mesmerizing life-force that is taiko.

As cancer patient Anderson said, her taiko involvement provides a center of calm and meditative spirit, and she wants others to know that despite how extremely challenging and difficult it is "living knowing that you're going to die," that coming back to taiko has confirmed for her that she can still be physical. She deeply relishes the mind/body connection afforded by her taiko practice when "just showing up is a success."

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