



# Drumming Up the Gifts/Drumming Down the Blessings



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By Mary Runser

Photography by Doug Russell



**“There are people who believe that they have absolutely no musical inclination whatsoever, but really that just isn’t true. Anyone can play a drum and enjoy a drum circle.”**

**— Lori Fithian  
(Pictured above)**

## Drum Circles in Ann Arbor

Since the earliest of times, drumming has been a part of nearly every human culture. Drumming was used as a way to communicate across distances, the rhythms and cadences expressing the news of birth, death, celebration, and war. Throughout the ages, drumming has remained an integral part of those cultures, and now drumming circles are taking on a renewed popularity in many communities around the world.

Drumming circles offer gifts and blessings by fulfilling several basic needs of people within a community. First of all, as Lori Fithian of Drummunity explained, drumming and drumming circles are just fun. "Anybody can play a drum, really. It's not hard to hit a drum with your hand or with a mallet. It's not as difficult as you might think to maintain a beat, and, before you know it, you're having fun and making music." Certainly there are rhythms that are more intricate and require more focus and concentration to maintain, but when you are gathered in a group of people and you suddenly realize you're making music together, it's quite a remarkable moment.

Curtis Allen Glatter, who leads monthly drumming circles and workshops through the Mind, Body, and Spirit Wellness Center, explained that "when it comes to drumming circles, there is no requisite level of expertise. Drumming is for everybody, from the absolute novice to the accomplished musician. Everybody has something to offer, from four years old to ninety-nine and over."

While most of the circles have a facilitator, there is no real leader in the group. The facilitator's job is to get everyone started with a simple beat. As people join the group and gain a bit of comfort, different and varying beats can be added. "There are people who believe that they have absolutely no musical inclination whatsoever," Lori said, "but really that just isn't true. Anyone can play a drum and enjoy a drum circle."

**Drumming offers many blessings, such as: stress release, personal growth and empowerment, cooperation, listening skills, diversity awareness, spontaneity and creativity, musical/rhythmic expression, relaxation, wellness, and community-building and connection.**

Drum circles can also be intentional. "One Dance, One Drum, One Heart," an event sponsored by Drum4Wellness and the Interfaith Roundtable of Washtenaw County this past fall, was one such event. The goal was for the participants to experience a celebration of self, community, and spirit through drumming, dance, and chanting. The evening opened with community drumming and led into chanting and drumming in the four directions, based on the Native American Medicine wheel.

The drumming, the music, and the sound was different for each direction/element. The drumming/chanting/prayer began in the south, which is the element of water and represents all the emotions, both positive and negative (i.e., happiness, sadness), because the body has to experience all of them and learn to keep them in balance, in order to maintain health. Next, west is the element of earth, which represents the physical and teaches us to hold our spirits in our physical bodies. Earth is the element that keeps us grounded and helps us to be in the moment. North is the element of air, which represents the mental and encompasses all of our thoughts and beliefs. And finally, east is the element of fire, which represents the spirit, the unique life force that is you.

While drumming to the four directions/elements, my mind was able to go places and visualize those elements, perhaps in part because I had recently been to see the awesome beauty of Lake Superior (water), and also to appreciate the beauty of the mountains (earth) in West Virginia. Now whether this was an experience of an altered state of consciousness or recall, I'm not sure. But I

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## Drum Circles and Classes, and Drum Teachers

### **Drummunity** with Loti Fithian

Monthly drum circles in the Crazy Wisdom Bookstore Community Room. All instruments provided, No experience necessary

[www.drummunity.com](http://www.drummunity.com)

[www.lorifithian@mac.com](mailto:lorifithian@mac.com)

[lorifithian@mac.com](mailto:lorifithian@mac.com)

734-426-7818

### **Drum 4 Wellness** with Don Allen

[Don@drum4wellness.net](mailto:Don@drum4wellness.net)

734-480-1219

— at Center for Integrative Well Being —

every third Friday from 7:00-8:30 p.m

42839 Five Mile Rd. Plymouth, MI. 48170

All instruments provided, No experience necessary, \$15

— at Interfaith Center for Spiritual Growth —

every first Saturday from 7:30-9:00 p.m.

704 Airport Blvd. Ann Arbor, MI. 48104

All instruments provided, No experience necessary, Donation

— at Marshall Music Company —

every third Thursday from 6:30-8:00 p.m.

3240 E. Saginaw St. Lansing, MI. 48192

All instruments provided, No experience necessary, Free

[www.drum4wellness.net](http://www.drum4wellness.net)

### **Drum Circle** with Curtis Allen Glatter —

every third Saturday from 3:00-4:00p.m.

Body, Mind, Spirit Wellness Center

2007 S. State St. Ann Arbor, MI. 48104

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[www.bmse.com](http://www.bmse.com)

### **Tree of Life Cultural Arts Studio** with Sundance DiDomenico

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734-433-0697

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Every Tuesday from

4:30-5:30 - Hand Drumming for Kids

7:30-9:00 - Hand Drumming (Teens and Adults)

Every fourth Saturday from 8:00-11:00 - Drum Circle

All instruments provided, No Experience necessary, Free

[www.treeoflifestudio.org](http://www.treeoflifestudio.org).

### **Visitation Barn Chapel** with Kristyne Lemerand —

734-240-5494 (Mon. – Fri. 9:00 a.m. – 4:00 p.m.)

529 Stewart Rd. Monroe, MI. 48162

Drum Circle every second Friday from 7:00-9:00 p.m.

Some instruments provided, No experience necessary, Donation

[www.ihmsisters.org](http://www.ihmsisters.org) (drum circle information listed under

Spirituality link)

### **Ibrahim Aminou** offers private lessons and teaches on Sundays at

Relax Station from 6:30 to 7:30 p.m.

Phone: 734-644-7693

### **Paul Militello** offers private lessons and teaches Fridays at the

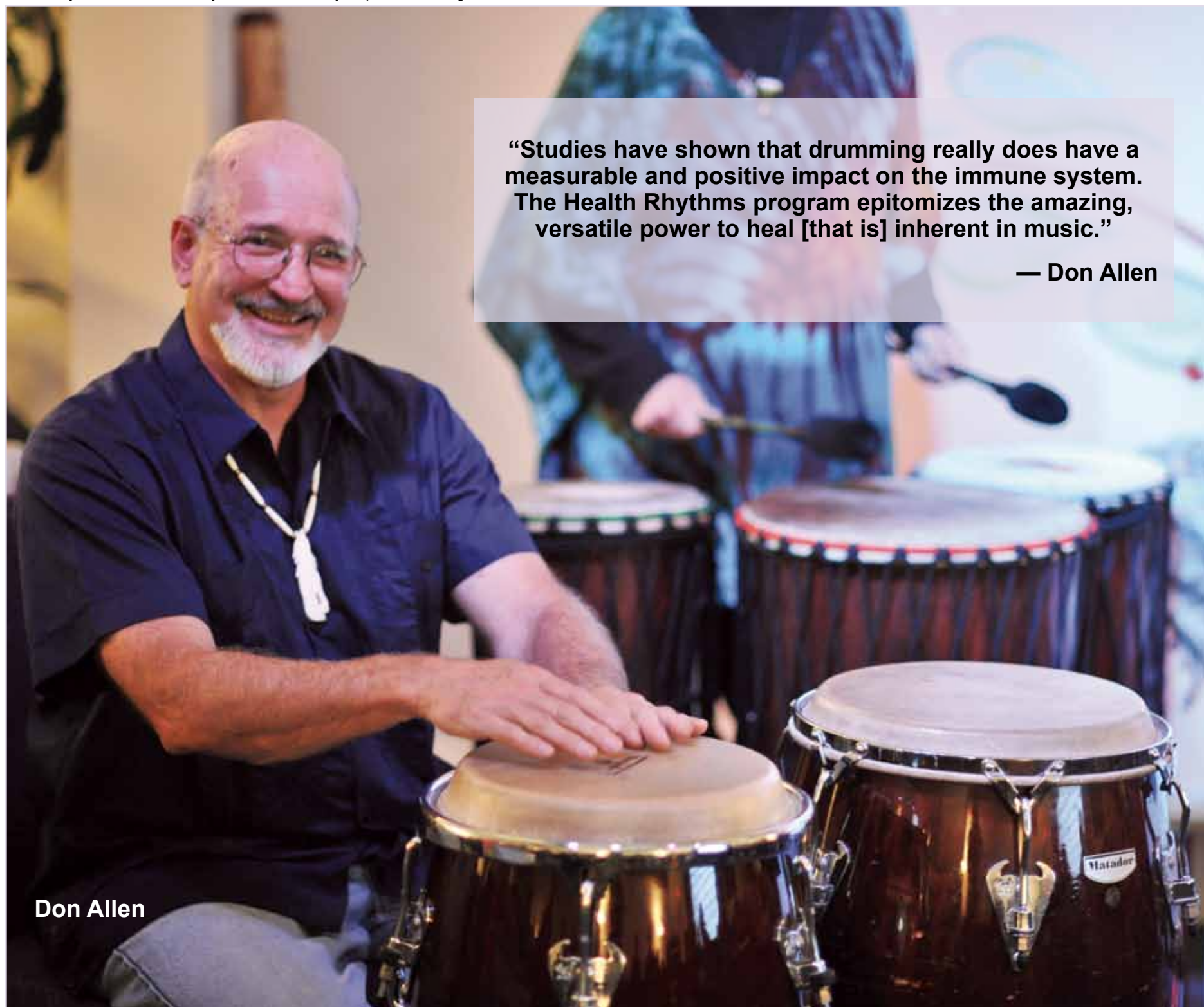
Phoenix Center, 7:30 p.m.

Phone: 734-669-7582

Email: [paul@rhythmfamily.com](mailto:paul@rhythmfamily.com)

Website: [www.rhythmfamily.com](http://www.rhythmfamily.com)

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**“Studies have shown that drumming really does have a measurable and positive impact on the immune system. The Health Rhythms program epitomizes the amazing, versatile power to heal [that is] inherent in music.”**

**— Don Allen**

**Don Allen**

## **Drumming Up the Gifts/ Drumming Down the Blessings**

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know there were moments that I don't really remember drumming, or concentrating on drumming. I just simply allowed myself to be carried away on those rhythms to memories of the things I had recently seen.

The Drum4Wellness event demonstrated another basic human need that drumming fulfills, that of achieving the serenity of an altered state of consciousness. The amazing experience of so many people from varying backgrounds joining together, many without ever having drummed together before, to make such wonderful music

was incredible. The energy in the room was palpable, rich and focused, with a grateful spirit for the bounty of the four directions. The evening ended with a meditative chant and dance that encouraged the body awareness of the individual and eventually extended out into the community of participants.

Another basic need that drumming fulfills is building community. I used the word “participant” several times above, and with good reason. Drum circles are about participation, rather than performers and audiences. Drummunity, created by Lori Fithian, is a word that she invented to “express the community-building that happens when people come together around a circle of drums.” The energy of the drum circle is vibrant and infectious, and you can't help but want to join in.

There are health benefits to drumming, too, as the name “Drum4Wellness” implies. Particularly interested in the wellness aspect of drumming, Lori trained under Dr. Barry Bittman, MD, neurologist and co-founder of “Health Rhythms,” a drum




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## Drumming is making inroads in areas that one might not expect. Major corporations such as Sprint, Hewlett Packard, and Verizon have all begun to use drumming circles for creative expression and team-building among their employees.

circle protocol for wellness centers. Research studies have shown that drumming has a direct effect on increasing the activity of white blood cells, the ones that do battle with and destroy cancer and other virally-infected cells. Dr. Bittman believes that drumming is a way of connecting the mind and the body for overall improved health.

Drum circles are cropping up in hospitals, health centers, and wellness centers all across the United States and other countries as well. Lori, a graduate of the University of Michigan with a bachelor of fine arts degree, takes her Drummunity program into local schools and universities, private parties, outdoor community festivals, staff meetings, and international conferences, as well as to events such as Michigan Peaceworks rallies and marches, protest demonstrations, and 4<sup>th</sup> of July parades.

Don Allen of Drum4Wellness is also a trained facilitator of the Health Rhythms Group Empowerment Drumming program. "Studies have shown," Don said, "that drumming really does have a measurable and positive impact on the immune system. This program epitomizes the amazing, versatile power to heal [that is] inherent in music."

Don takes his Drum4Wellness program to grief groups in association with St. Joseph Mercy Hospice and the Visiting Nurses Association of Southeastern Michigan. He also works with autistic children and their families through the Mid-Michigan Autism Association, and has worked with people recovering from drug and alcohol addiction, people suffering from chronic diseases, and community mental health workers.

In addition to being a professional drum circle facilitator, Don is also a professional musician and teacher. "It is my interest in and love for music and the healing arts that have led me to the art of drum circle facilitation," he explained. Don is also a member of the Tree of Life Drum and Dance Society based in Chelsea, Michigan, which teaches about and performs music of West Africa and the Caribbean at music festivals, special events, and schools throughout Michigan.

Drumming also fulfills an individual's need for a creative outlet and self-expression. Drum circles aren't always about following a certain pattern, rhythm or beat; rather, they can be as varied in approach as the people who participate. "Many people don't understand that there doesn't have to be a certain beat played," Curtis said. "In a circle, we may start out drumming a certain beat, but it's also okay to play multiple beats over top of that main beat. Drum circles are also about being creative, having fun and finding out what you can do with a drum."

An accomplished drummer, musician, composer, improviser and poet, Curtis seeks to find as many ways and objects as possible to create his music. His compositions have premiered with Trummerflora Collective, Detroit Symphony, Pontiac Oakland Symphony and the Camarada Ensemble. Once a month, he hosts a drum circle at the Body, Mind, Spirit Wellness Center in Ann Arbor, where he encourages participants to play different styles as well as different instruments, and to just enjoy the amazing creative spirit that is inherent in a drumming circle.

Curtis enjoys working with children because they don't tend to have the shyness or hesitance about self-expression that adults tend to display. "It's fun to mix that child-play with something that adults can play and learn as well. I wish that adults could just let themselves go the way that kids do."

Drumming is making inroads in areas that one might not expect. Major corporations such as Sprint, Hewlett Packard, and Verizon have all begun to use drumming circles for creative expression and team-building among their employees. "In many ways," Curtis said, "drumming circles allow you to see and appreciate the beautiful gifts that others have to offer." Drumming can be a way to put aside differences and to see and allow commonalities to be born and to thrive within a community.

As part of my research for this article, I participated in drum circles sponsored by Lori, Don and Curtis. I am not a professional drummer, but it is something that has held my interest since attending the Womyn's Music Festival in Hart, Michigan several years ago. So, I bought a djembe and set about attending these circles, drumming out music with many people whom I didn't know. But, it didn't matter that I knew no one, or that I was new to the groups, because they were welcoming and encouraged everyone to join in and make music.

It still amazes me how easy it is to sit with a group of such diverse people and be able to make such awesome music. The circles were fun and instructional at the same time. Now that I've attended some drum circles, and have my own djembe, I absolutely will go back and drum again! I love it; it's so tribal and instinctive in many ways.

Nearly anytime I am listening to music, you will catch me drumming out a beat... on the table, my leg, the steering wheel in my truck. I now drum at home alone, and have found it to be an amazing creative outlet. When I sit down to write after drumming, words and creative thoughts seem to flow more smoothly and readily.

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## Drumming Books

The books listed below are available at Crazy Wisdom, or can be readily ordered for you. Support your local, independent bookstores!

**When the Drummers were Women** by Layne Redmond---A Spiritual History of Rhythm

**Drummer's Path: Moving the Spirit with Traditional Drumming in Performance and Invocation** by Sule Greg Wilson

**Sacred Drumming** by Steven Ash

**Healing Drum: African Wisdom Teachings** by Yaya Diallo and Mitchell Hall

**Bodhran Basics** by Stefan Hanningan---An introductory course in the art of playing the Bodhran, covering all the basic techniques needed to accompany traditional and other music.

**Caribbean Currents** by Peter Manuel---Caribbean Music from Rumba to Reggae

**Drum Circle Spirit** by Arthur Hull---Facilitating the Human Potential Through Rhythm

**Drum Circle Facilitation** by Arthur Hull---Building Community Through Rhythm

**Sacred Space, Sacred Sound** by Susan Elizabeth Hale---The Acoustic Mysteries of Holy Places

**The Soul of Hand Drumming** by Doug Sole---A comprehensive book for beginners to advanced, solo and circle hand drummers.

**The Way of the Pulse** by John Diamond, MD---Drumming with Spirit

**Sacred Beat: From the Heart of the Drumming Circle** by Patricia Lesko

**Hand Drumming: Rhythms from Around the World** by Thunder Beat

**Healing Power of the Drum: A Psychotherapist Explores the Healing Power of Rhythm** by Robert Lawrence Friedman

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Drumming is a gift, not only given by certain people who have great drumming ability, but rather a gift that anyone can contribute to help the group attain wonderful results. All of the drum circle facilitators I spoke to believe that drumming is a gift that everyone can experience. And as Lori Fithian summed up, drumming offers many blessings, such as: “Stress release, personal growth and empowerment, cooperation, listening skills, team building, diversity awareness, spontaneity and creativity, musical/rhythmic expression, relaxation, wellness, and community-building and connection.”

**Another basic need that drumming fulfills is building community... Drum circles are about participation, rather than performers and audiences.**

If you have an interest in drumming, and even if you don't, I encourage you to try at least one drum circle. At the least, you will have a good time — and you never know, you may well find that drumming really is a blessing for the whole you: body, mind, and spirit. Then you too can drum up the gifts as you drum down the blessings.

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Curtis Allen Glatter

**“In a circle, we may start out drumming a certain beat, but it’s also okay to play multiple beats over top of that main beat. Drum circles are also about being creative, having fun and finding out what you can do with a drum.”**

**— Curtis Allen Glatter**

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### Drumming CDs

(Those with an asterisk are readily available at Crazy Wisdom. The others may be harder to locate, so you will need to google them to see how or if they're obtainable.)

- \*Rhythms of the Chakras --- Drumming for the Body's Energy Centers by Glen Velez
- \*Drumming Inside Mother Earth by Motherdrum
- \*Meditation Drum by David and Steve Gordon
- \*Earth Drum by David and Steve Gordon
- \*Sacred Drum Visions by David and Steve Gordon
- \*Drums on Fire by James Asher and Sivamani
- Drum with Geoff Johns---How to Play the Rhythms of African and Latin America
- Drums of Passion by Babatunde Olatunji---The Beat
- Drums of Passion by Babatunde Olatunji---The Invocation
- Earth Tribe Rhythms by Brent Lewis
- Hacia El Amor by John Santos and the Coro Folklorico Kindembo
- Ilu Ana ---Sacred Rhythms
- Lady Drummer by Fatu
- Love Drum Talk by Babtunde Olatunji
- Women's Empowerment Drumming by Christine Stevens, Cynthia Fitzpatrick, and Mona Tavakoli---Play Along CD
- Yoruba Drums from Benin, West Africa

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