

MTA's Tony Martin Connects with West Africa Through Music

By ALISHA GOMEZ

(Feb. 13, 2003) When Tony Martin returned in 1971 from the World Campus Afloat Program, sponsored by Chapman University, he knew he had to get involved with West African percussion.

A senior equal opportunity program representative in MTA's Diversity and Economic Opportunity department, Martin was a student when he saw the National Ballet of Sierra Leone perform during his trip to Africa. He was in awe of the performance.

"After the performance, I was trying to buy instruments from the group," says Martin. His first purchase was a wooden bilaphone, "forefather" of the modern xylophone, and two drums.

Mild-mannered EO rep by day, Tony Martin, at right and below, marches to the beat of a different drummer as a distinctly authentic West African percussionist.



Without any formal instruction, he started playing with other Chapman students, making up the music as they went along. His first performance was for the college Board of Trustees dinner.

After graduation, when he moved back to Los Angeles, Martin started looking for musicians who knew how to play the West African percussion style of music.

Taught by master drummer

He joined a group called Mori Nimba, the first West African group based in LA. His teacher was a master drummer from Guinea called "Papa."

Over the years, he has taken lessons from many different instructors. On a second trip to West Africa with the group, Sona Sane, Martin studied percussion with the National Ballet of Senegal.

He also has played with the Nigerian ensemble Rhythms of the Village and with the Brazilian ensemble Folklorico du Brazil, as well as with other drum groups throughout California.

Martin now performs throughout Southern California with Abalaye (whose name means "remember your ancestors"), a group that hopes to open an educational center in the area.

'Everything and everywhere'

Martin has always liked percussion and remembers, as a child, playing rhythms on "everything and everywhere."

His passion for West African percussion grew not because he wanted to be a musician, but because he felt connected to the music.

"It was the spiritual attraction that really drew me in," Martin says. "And playing was like going to church, what I am trying to hang on to, what has kept me going to learn more and more."

"Here I am, 50 years old," he says, "and I'm still drumming."

[Back to Bulletin Board](#)