

Arabic Music Masters Susu Pampanin & Miles Jay

Susu Pampanin (full version)

The drum is a forceful instrument—it's the energy within rhythm and its sounds compel people—uniting those who hear it through music, dance, and story. When Susu Pampanin was still a girl, she intuitively felt that power and was passionately drawn to it. “Way before I was 12 I knew I wanted to play drums,” she said. Her mother Amina, a well-known belly dance performer in San Francisco during Susu's growing-up years, sparked Susu's intense interest when she introduced her to a small clay drum she was learning to play. “She sat me down on the couch with my brother and sister and played a *beledi* beat. Then she passed the drum from child to child and let us try it. I couldn't get the rhythm out of my mind. The next day I asked her about it, and she taught me another rhythm.”

Now Susu Pampanin is one of the world's few female masters of Arabic percussion, and treats audiences everywhere to a strong and passionate sound that is also remarkable for its nuance and intimacy. Beginning in her teens she began to play in Arabic orchestras, and has continued to impress dancers and musicians around the world with her performances. She's the woman behind Susu Pampanin and the Cairo Cats, and their classic CD *Dancing Drums*, as well as *Hands of Time*, both favorite recordings of legions of dancers. Last year she released a DVD with dancer Zaina Zehesha called *Zill Drills: How to Play Finger Cymbals*, a fantastic instructional video on many zill patterns and drum rhythms.

Susu also has a strong connection to Jawaahir Dance Company as a musician with the George Lammam orchestra. She's played for the annual show three times. “Each year there are different themes, different challenges. It's a great experience. People in Minneapolis are really warm. It's a home away from home.”

The journey from practicing in her family's living room to the international stage is truly an inspiration, and demonstrates how fully embracing the drum has completely changed her life as a person and an artist. As a girl and a young woman, Susu struggled to get certain adults to take her drumming seriously, and, sometimes against big challenges, she persevered to reach a level of unparalleled excellence. Meeting Susu in person is also a rare delight. She's friendly, witty, and an ardent spokesperson for many musical traditions.

When Susu became interested in drums, she believed that her destiny would be to play in a rock and roll band. But when she was in junior high and wanted to join the school band she was denied access to drums. “It broke my heart,” she said, as she was steered toward the instruments considered appropriate for girls at the time: flute, oboe, French horn, clarinet. “I played clarinet for three years against my will,” she said, chuckling about it now, but she did learn to read music and learned a lot about music theory, things that have served her well as a foundation in her career.

Even though her school forbid her to play drums, her mother arranged to give her lessons with master percussionist and composer Vince Delgado who also lives in San Francisco. Through her practice with Vince, and her mother's dance career, she met a lot of traveling musicians and eventually sat in as a drummer for some of their shows. “I wanted to learn as much as I could,” she said, grateful for the experience at such a young age.

However, not everyone was supportive of a girl learning Arabic drumming. One encounter in particular tested her commitment to the craft. Under the auspices of a private lesson, one professional drummer told her she'd never be able to be really good at it because she was female and didn't have the cultural background that would enable her to understand the music. It

reinforced outdated attitudes that there was an inner circle of male drummers and that she'd never be a part of it. "I was on the verge of tears, I felt like quitting and I was so discouraged," she said, "But then I accessed an 'I'll show him' attitude. I spent a lot of time after that playing loud and working hard."

Even though she felt she had something to prove to those who didn't respect her gender, she said her ultimate motivation for playing percussion is the music. "I never did it for the novelty. I just fell in love with the music, and I want to share that love by playing with other Arabic musicians," Susu said.

Nicole LeCorgne, another professional female Arabic percussionist, said Susu was her mentor, inspiring her to relocate to San Francisco for many years as she sought to take her drumming skills to another level. "She's phenomenal, an excellent teacher, always encouraging and supportive. You just don't find people as talented as she is who are also so generous," Nicole said.

Susu has expanded her mentorship role in the last few years as a member of Women Drummers International, which brings together women drummers from around the world from a variety of percussion disciplines. The organization strives to give women and girls the opportunity to learn how to drum, especially if they have been denied that opportunity at some point in their lives. Every year they hold a camp in California called Born to Drum for girls and women 15 years old or older. "We want to support young women in the world who want to drum," Susu said about being a part of this group.

Susu does think there is a certain sensibility that is unique among women. "We are striving for balance and a full range as musicians, but also to be able to express softer, clear sounds, because sometimes drumming can be bombastic," she said. She thinks this is especially useful when playing for dancers, something she really likes to do. She explained that some drummers play drum solos for themselves and feel like they have to "dumb it down" to play for a dancer, but Susu believes that the drumming is highlighted with good dancing. "How a dancer uses music to create a really dynamic show is a visual manifestation of me doing my job," she said. "The most important part of a drum solo is my own creative expression and dialogue with the dancer."

Susu Pampanin is a true trailblazer, fervent about sharing her love of the instrument with others. "For those of us women in the genre, for all of us, it's a calling," she said.