

Women Drummers International

Born To Drum 2025

Faculty Bios

Afia Walking Tree



Afia Walking Tree, M.Ed., (She/Zhey/We/Nana) is a Jamaican-born, internationally acclaimed percussionist and visionary facilitator. Afia combines her deep connection to the earth and the drum to cultivate sustainable life-art practices. Through dynamic edutainment performances, workshops, embodied lectures, coaching, and permaculture design, Afia uses drum medicine as a transformative tool to challenge and dismantle gender, racial, and intersectional violence.

Afia serves as an adjunct professor at the California Institute for Integral Studies, an Artist in Residence at the African American Policy Forum, and the V-Day Jamaica representative for One Billion Rising. She currently resides on a 25-acre farm in Jamaica, where they are the principal steward, curating healing journeys and eco-experiences for gender-expansive women, queer individuals, and trans-masculine folx. Their livity fosters intentional connections to rhythms of land, ancestors, movement, and drum. Visit us at SolidarityYaadJamaica.org or check us out on Instagram at [solidarityaad_ja](https://www.instagram.com/solidarityaad_ja). Afia is thrilled to join her drum family this year and share and grow with us during this radically evocative times. Let us heal together and remember who we are.

Amikaeyla Gaston



Amikaeyla is an amazing vocalist and percussionist who comes from the Washington DC area. She has studied, recorded with, and shared the stage with many award winning artists, including Take 6, Sweet Honey In The Rock, Baba Olatunji, Mickey Hart, Gil Scott Heron, Wyclef, Ubaka Hill, Ferron, Vicki Randle, Linda Tillery, Chris Williamson, and Pete Seeger.

Proclaimed as “one of the purest contemporary voices...” by National Public Radio, powerhouse Amikaeyla embraces the best of many types of music: from Bel Canto, Funk & Bossa Nova to Blues, Sacred Chanting and Soul, Afro-Cuban and Jazz.

Before moving to the SF Bay area in 2007 Amikaeyla recorded her debut album *Mosaic* (2004), which received national acclaim, and earned her eight Washington Area Music Association Awards, or Wammys, including Best Jazz Vocalist, Best Jazz Recording, Best Urban Contemporary Vocalist, Best World Music Vocalist, Best World Music Recording, and Best Debut Album. Amikaeyla was named DC’s best female composer in 2006 & 2008, and was also honored with first prize for Best World Music Composition from the 2010-2011 Maryland State Arts Council.

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Amy Vitro



Amy Vitro is an accomplished multi-instrumentalist, versed in a broad array of musical traditions and styles. She has studied with numerous masters of the shekere, djembe, and conga and has participated in many women's drum camps and orchestras throughout North America. Amy is now deeply involved with the folkloric musical traditions of the Caribbean coast of Colombia and Puerto Rican Bomba, both rooted in West African and Indigenous traditions.

Amy is a member of several all-women percussion and performance groups in the Washington, DC metro area. She plays shekere for Bele Bele Rhythm Collective (West African), repique with Batalá Washington (Afro- Brazilian samba), and Alegre/flute/clarinet for La Marvela (Afro-Colombian folkloric). Amy also co-founded musical duo "Amor y Luz" with her partner Kutasha Silva, creating a unique blend of classical and Latin American music. Amy sings, plays flute, clarinet, guitar, ukulele, cajon, assorted hand percussion, and does song arrangements and collaboration on the duo's original music.

Ava Square



A performance artist (choreographer/musician/actor), writer/poet, documentary filmmaker, and teacher, Ava's creativity is fluid and fulfilling. A lover of multimedia, she often incorporates her poems and writing in her dance and music performances and has appeared in numerous short films and film productions. The writer, director, and editor of two films, AVOTCJA and SACRED SPACE, Avotcja's film SACRED SPACE, featuring Long Beach's Earthlodge Center for Transformation's founder & chief steward, Queen Hollins, was highlighted at QWOEFF 2012 and purchased by Cabrillo College for their library in 2013.

A recipient of two grants from the California Arts Council, Ava created Spirit Theatre of Dance Company as well as Spirit Theatre Dance Studio (STDS) offering a vast array of classes, programs, and events to the community. Her studio received the East Bay Express newspapers "Best in the Bay" award two years running and was featured in two seasonal television commercials for sponsors, Bay Area Black United Fund and KTVU. Ava currently works for the Health and Human Resource Education Center (HHREC). She is the mother of four and grandmother of 3+.

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Avotcja (*pronounced Avacha*)



Avotcja is a card carrying New York born Music fanatic/sound junkie & popular Bay Area Radio DeeJay & member of the award winning group Avotcja & Modúpue. She's a lifelong Musician/Writer/Educator/Storyteller & is on a shamelessly Spirit driven melodic mission to heal herself. Avotcja talks to the Trees & listens to the Wind against the concrete & when they answer it usually winds up in a Poem or Short Story. For this Festival my Workshop will be on La Palabra Musical, The Music Of The Word, the Rhythm that speaks in us & through us & our responsibility in using this most sacred of gifts wisely. I want to unlock a waterfall of poetic metaphors as strong as any Rhythm you've ever heard played on the Drum & see where it take us!!! I'm ready, are you? [DAUGHTERS OF THE DRUM, A POEM BY AVOTCJA, 2014](#)

Carolyn Brandy



Carolyn Brandy has been drumming for over 45 years. She has been instrumental in bringing women to the spirit and healing of the Drum. Carolyn is the Artistic Director of Women Drummers International and co-creator of the Born to Drum Women's Drum Camp. She was also the founder of the Bay Area's favorite marching band, Sistah Boom in 1981. In 1976, Carolyn co-founded the popular band, Alive! that toured the nation for almost 10 years and has 4 recordings to its credit. She has worked in the SF Bay area for many years as a composer, performer, teacher and cultural worker.

Carolyn is an expert in the folkloric drumming styles found throughout the island of Cuba. She has been a practitioner of the Yoruba-based Cuban religion, Regla de Ocha, also known as Santeria, since 1976. She was initiated as a priest of the religion in Havana, Cuba by Amelia Pedroso in 2000.

Carolyn has led six successful cultural tours to the Island of Cuba to study Folkloric music. She organized workshops in Havana, Matanzas, Jovellanos, Cienfuegos, Camaguey, Santiago De Cuba, Guantanamo, and Baracoa, where the groups studied with masters of Afro-Cuban drumming and dance.

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Debbie Fier



Debbie Fier has over 35 years of experience as a performing vocalist, drummer, pianist, composer, percussionist, and teacher. She has studied numerous drum styles for over 30 years, including Afro-Cuban and West African rhythms, focusing deeply on the rhythms and instruments of the Middle East and N. Africa. She drums and performs regularly with the Sabah Belly Dance Ensemble and the band Safra, as well as with a variety of music groups, dancers and poets, in educational, musical, and spiritual settings. Debbie continuously uses music and drumming to build bridges between different cultural and spiritual communities. Her passion for rhythm and music is evident in the energy she brings to her craft, creating an environment for safety, playfulness, and exploration for her students and the other musicians and dancers that she collaborates with. She teaches body percussion and drumming throughout the bay area, coaching people on how to tap into the power of drumming and rhythm as both a meditation and a healing tool, and performs regularly on dumbek, riqq, tar and djembe.

Over the past 10 years, she has found a home at Kehilla Community Synagogue as a spiritual leader through drumming, where she has been named the “Heartbeat of the Service”. She teaches classes called “Drumming as Prayer”. Her original compositions are available on five recordings: In Your Hands, Firelight, Coming Home, Arise, Kehilla, Inspirational Music of Kehilla Community Synagogue, and her most recent recording WATERWAYS, featuring soothing handpan with the beautiful artistry of Jami Sieber, co-producer and gorgeous cellist.

. All are available on itunes! For more info visit [her website](#).

Denise Solis



Denise Solis is an activist, labor organizer, and musician who has been living in the Bay Area since 2002. Denise began working in the Latino/a cultural arts community in 1999 at the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center as a Program Coordinator in San Antonio, Texas where she is from. Upon re-locating to the Bay Area in 2002 she worked for Teatro Campesino and La Pena Cultural Arts Center before making a shift to labor and community organizing in 2003. Denise began studying the Afro Puerto Rican musical tradition of Bomba in late 2004 at the Bomba and Plena workshop at La Pena Cultural Center in Berkeley and with Román ‘Ito’ Carrillo, she has also learned from and sought after learning and experience through collaboration with Bomberos and Bomberas in Puerto Rico and the Diaspora. Denise has also more recently come under the mentorship and continues to learn from, Jesus Cepeda, El Tambor Mayor. Denise is one of a few female lead drummers (Primo/a) or Subidora) in Puerto Rico and the Diaspora within the Bomba genre.

Denise has taught workshops since 2010 at the Women Drummers International’s yearly Born to Drum Camp in Northern California as well as their special Drum Sundays workshops on featured Sundays in the Bay Area. She is also teaching Bomba Percussion and Song classes and playing for the Bomba Dance classes (Basic, Intermediate,

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Denise Solis continued

and Advanced levels) at Studio Grand with, Bomba dance teacher Julia Cepeda under their project, Taller Bombalele, on Sundays in Oakland and on Wednesday evenings at Galeria de la Raza in San Francisco and is the director of the class performance ensemble Grupo Taller Bombalele.

Elizabeth Sayre



Elizabeth Sayre (percussionist) is a musician and teacher. She has studied African diaspora percussion, focusing on Havana-style batá drumming, for over 30 years. Her main teachers were Omomola Iyabunmi, W. Paul Lucas, Iyanifa Awodola Oriyomi, Leonard “Doc” Gibbs (ibaye), James Corry, and Joe Ruscitto in Philadelphia; and in Afro-Cuban music, John Amira, Orlando Fiol, Amelia Pedroso (ibaye), Aleida Socarras Torres, Lázaro Pedroso, Michael Spiro, Orlando Alvarez Gonzalez, Michel Aldama, and Manley Lopez “Piri,” in the US, Cuba, and Mexico.

Since moving to the Bay Area in 2012, she has served as musical director for Arenas Dance Company (led by choreographer-dancer Susana Arenas Pedroso), participating in small and large shows around the region every year. Elizabeth has accompanied weekly orisha song classes on Zoom with legendary vocalist Gladys “Bobi” Céspedes since 2021. She currently plays with Amikaeyla Gaston’s vocal and percussion quintet “Voices of A Dream,” and from 2012-15 played in Carolyn Brandy’s Ojalá in the Bay and in Santiago de Cuba. During 20+ years in Philadelphia, she performed with Alô Brasil, and a variety of Latin American groups. From 1999-2009 she was lead accompanist for several Afro-Cuban folkloric dance teachers in New York, and from 2002-2006 participated in the 17-woman folklore project Obini Ashe. With Adwoa Tacheampong (itótele), Michele Drysdale (Buffy) (okónkolo), and Susan Rapalee (akpwon), she recorded the 2012 cd, “Okan Iloro: Drum and Song for the Orishas,” a tribute to her teachers.

Jeni Swerdlow



San Francisco Bay Area percussionist and registered art therapist Jeni Swerdlow, MA-ATR is a dynamic and engaging facilitator, trainer, presenter, and performer. Founding DRUMMM Rhythmic Events in 2000, her interactive, hands-on group drumming programs have engaged many thousands of participants at a wide variety of events in the U.S. and abroad. Swerdlow is a REMO endorsed drum circle facilitator, trained HealthRHYTHMS facilitator, and lifelong student of West African drumming and world percussion. Swerdlow is best known for her innovative strategies and playful attitude that foster teambuilding, support wellness, enhance celebrations, and strengthen community for event participants of all ages and backgrounds. More info on [Bay Area Drum Circles and Drumming](#) is located here.

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Jnana Gowan



Jnana Gowan is the founder of Balance Point Shamanism and a gifted shamanic practitioner, Certified Transpersonal Hypnotherapist, ceremonialist, and teacher in the healing arts. With a rich background in yoga, Reiki, Peruvian shamanism, and other spiritual practices, Jnana weaves these traditions into her soundscapes and one-on-one or group healing sessions.

She skillfully creates immersive soundscape experiences that invite deep inner transformation. Guided by shamanic wisdom, her sessions support profound shifts and healing on many levels.

Jnana offers shamanic healing, sound, and hypnotherapy both virtually and in person (based in the San Francisco East Bay). Her work is grounded in insight and infused with a generous dose of humor—essential tools for navigating these rapidly changing times.

Learn more about Jnana and her offerings at: www.balancepointshamanism.com

Mabiba Baegne



Mabiba Baegne is an internationally acclaimed teacher, drummer and choreographer of traditional and contemporary African Dance. Mabiba was born in Congo Brazzaville and initiated into dancing by her grandparents at the age of eight.

Mabiba is an inspiring drummer. In addition to her Congolese dancing, Mabiba has studied West African dunun drumming with master drummer Famoudou Konate in Guinea and she was the first woman to teach this form in the United States.

Mabiba is also an acclaimed singer and has toured and recorded with Salif Keita, master drummer Mamady Keita, and Samba Ngo.

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Mar Stevens



Mar Stevens, drum warrior, connected with her inner rhythms as a child drumming on her grade school desk. She began her drum journey twelve years ago with Master Drummer, Afia Walking Tree, of Spirit Drumz. The Drum transformed her life and continues to inspire and heal her.

She continued her study of West African rhythms by attending the Fore-Fote drum camp in Guinea, West Africa. She studied with Master Drummers and dancers on the Island of Roume, learning songs, dances, and rhythms.

Mar teaches and loves sharing the rhythms of West Africa with community. She performs in the ensemble, Sistahs of the Drum, a Bay Area group of Women of African descent (www.sistahsoftthedrums.org). The group's mission is to heal, transform, and witness through the power of the drum.

Michaelle Goerlitz



Michaelle Goerlitz has been playing drums and percussion since she was eight years old. After attending college in the Midwest, she moved to San Francisco in 1980 to continue her studies, which have led to exploration of Brazilian, Afro Cuban, Venezuelan, and Middle Eastern rhythms (plus American idioms jazz, R & B & funk). She was a founding member of two renowned & long-term projects, the Blazing Redheads and Wild Mango. Both groups blended many different styles which showcased Michaelles versatile percussive skills.

Among the list of people Michaelle has played with: VNote Ensemble, Venezuelan Music Project, Chelle & Friends, Wayne Wallace, Mark Levine, The Brazilian Jazz Project, Ojala, rhiannon, Barbara Higbie, Jami Sieber and Samba Rio.

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Neena McNair



I first experienced drumming as a child at local pow-wows. Women were not then allowed to sit and sing at the drum. I was drawn to dance in my teens, and through my 20's I danced many styles. In my early 30s I was introduced to Congolese dance and drum. It was everything I had been searching for dancing to live drumming Heaven!

During that time I was also introduced to a Native American women's drum circle. I was captivated! I have been singing and drumming in native women's plains-style drum circles for almost 30 years now. Feeling the power and responsibility of these times, I feel so fortunate to have come full circle! I invite you to the circle, we co-create, when we gather at women's BTB.

Ouida Lewis



Ouida Lewis educator and percussionist/hand drummer, was a lecturer at Edna Manley College of Visual and Performing Arts in Kingston, Jamaica for a decade. She teaches traditional rhythms of her island home Jamaica, the original sound of the Reggae genre, West African Djembe and intense drum technique classes. She is also a tap dancer and personal trainer. She teaches both children and adults in an effort to pass on the knowledge of the evolution of Jamaican music. Ouida says, This is important to me as I realize that people are becoming less aware of the origins of our music and the enormous rich culture it spans from, thus losing a sense of self.

Together with a group of educators we hold and teach the history of the traditional Jamaican folk forms. It is a long-time dream of mine to share Jamaican traditional rhythms outside of Jamaica. Ouida has been teaching at Hillel prep school in Kingston for over 17 years. Her latest project is working with the Child Resiliency Programme stationed at the Mountain View Primary and infant school in Kingston working with troubled children using the power of the drum to pass on self mastery, focus and patience

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Peta Robles

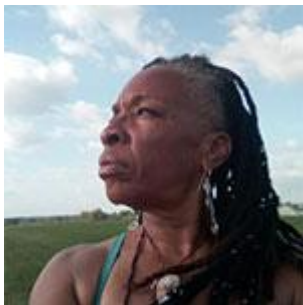


Peta Robles is one of the most talented female percussionists in Peru. She was born in Lima, within the renowned Afro-Peruvian family of great musicians and dancers “**Los Izquierdo**”, where she learned from an early age, by inheritance, to play the cajón and to tap her feet.

Peta is a **national cajón champion** in Peru and has traveled through Europe and the Americas as an ambassador of Afro-Peruvian music and dance. She stands out for her patience, her charisma and her extraordinary ability to teach how to play the cajón and to tap her feet, transmitting not only technique, but also the deep Afro-Peruvian

cultural legacy.

Qween Hollins



My name is Queen Hollins. I am a Queer Elder Activist Grandmother! I am the Founder of the Earthlodge Center for Transformation Spiritual Community in Long Beach, CA. The Earthlodge centers Black Southern Indigenous practices, and embraces and encourages all indigenous practices.

We practice healing justice that creates pathways to wellness by hosting a variety of ceremonies that are connected to Nature and that provides opportunities for individual and communal wellness on mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual levels. To learn more about our community, ceremonies, online and in person classes

and to hear about my new book, *Earth Doula*, please visit: www.earthlodgecenter.org

Rebecca Rodríguez



Rebecca Rose Rodríguez is a first generation Colombian-American percussionist. She has studied music and percussion in the Bay Area since 2017 with musicians like Annette Aguilar, Karl Perazzo, Jesús Díaz and more. Rebecca was a long standing member and eventually student director of John Calloway’s Afro Cuban Jazz Ensemble at San Francisco State where she learned to play Latin percussion and how to lead a band. She then began her own all 10 piece female Salsa band, [Agua Pura](#), in 2022. Her band continues to gig around the Bay Area with shows coming up at The Verdi Club, Bissap Baobab and more.

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Sena Kugbega



Sena Kugbega is from Cape Coast, Ghana, (West Africa) and has been teaching drum and dance since she was 13 years old. As a young girl growing up, she always knew what she wanted to do. Sena Kugbega has also traveled with her mother, Award winning only female master drummer in Ghana Adwoa Kudoto, throughout the US teaching and performing in Washington, New York, Atlanta and California, etc.

Sena was always willing to learn; learning how to have fun drumming and dancing. Dancing has always been part of her life and she does it with enthusiasm and joy. Sena is an excellent teacher and her classes are always fun with lots of room for

plenty of laughter!

Sheree Seretse



Sheree Seretse, Director of the Anzanga and Zambuko Marimba Ensembles has been teaching, studying and performing for over 50 years. She has also directed 3 youth ensembles Shumba, Simba and Ghazi. Affectionately known as “mama marimba”, Sheree’s passion and drive for Zimbabwean Marimba music shines through the five recordings she has produced and numerous other recordings on which she has made appearances. Sheree is currently teaching students K-8 and facilitating workshop throughout the country.

Sheree received her initial training through renowned musician and composer Dumisani V “Dumi” V Maraire. She has facilitated many workshops around the country and has toured extensively around the globe..

Sheree believes that marimba music is accessible to everyone.

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Sue Kaye (Suki)



Sue 'Suki' Kaye , originally from NYC and now living in the Bay Area has been a percussionist playing congas, ngoma, barril, kalimba and more since 1976. She has been deeply influenced by many amazing teachers studying the music of the Congo, Cuba, Puerto Rico, Ghana, Brazil, Trinidad and more!. Over the years she has performed with several bands including Azucar y Crema, Samba Ngo, Montuno Groove, Zakiya Hooker, Liquid Girlfriend, Taller Bombalele, Rita Lackey and presently with Key Elements Latin Jazz Ensemble that has an album released entitled Arrival. She has had the pleasure of sharing the stage and opening shows for such well known artists as King Sunny Ade, Sheila E and Babatunde Olatunji.

Suki is also an experienced dance accompanist playing for both classes and performances. She is an educator and has taught preschool, elementary school, and after school programs with kids for many years, as well as conducting drum workshops for both adults and children . She also enjoys writing and arranging music and of course playing drums and being creative with other musicians.

Susu Pampanin



Susu Pampanin has explored and studied all types of percussion instruments and styles of music, but her talent is especially evident in her work in Middle Eastern drumming. Susu is well known for her virtuosity in Arabic drumming and is highly respected by the Arabic professional music community. She has traveled world-wide and has worked and recorded with many artists and groups, including Wild Mango, Keith Terry and Crosspulse, Stellamara, Jazayer, BlueNile, Vince Delgado Quintet, Susu and the Cairo Cats, Holly Near, and ASWAT, an Arabic musical and vocal ensemble.

Her first album, "*Susu and the Cairo Cats, Live at the Giza Club*" was released in 1990 and was followed by her solo album, "*Susu Pampanin, Hands of Time*" in 2001. She also recorded a CD in Egypt, in 2013, *Nostalgia*, with the world renowned Safaa Farid Egyptian Band.

Susu teaches regularly in the San Francisco Bay Area, as well as all over the US in specialized workshops. She also has taught and performed at many esteemed events such as the SF Ethnic Dance Festival, Mendocino Middle Eastern Music Camp, Born to Drum Camp, the San Francisco International Arts Festival and the World Drum Festival.

[**Born To Drum Spotlight on Susu Pampanin! \(watch the video\)**](#) You can also find Susu on many DVDs as the percussionist for various internationally known belly dance instructors.

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Tanee Osborne



Tanee Osborne is a West African musician, teaching artist and multi-faceted entrepreneur, first introduced to the West African Drum and Dance culture as a dancer in 2009 with Bi-Okoto Drum and Dance, a West African Drum and Dance company out of Cincinnati, Ohio. After relocating to California, a few years later, fate placed her right in the heart of Leimert Park, Los Angeles's premiere cultural hub. There is where Tanee met her early teachers and began studying djembe. Now you never know if you will see Tanee playing a djembe, doun douns, kora, sabar or tama.

Whether it's teaching at-risk youth in the juvenile justice system, faculty at a university or a group of women in the woods, Tanee's passion lies in learning and sharing the culture and language of the ancestors, performing and facilitating learning experiences using the Malinke Culture through art and music.

Trinity Watkins



In 2020 Trinity became a certified Kundalini Yoga Teacher studying under Krishna Kaur and in 2021 became certified to teach youth through the Yoga for Youth Program developed by Krishna Kaur. Through the practice of Kundalini Yoga we work with the natural connection to the breath and life force energy inviting the mind to relax and be receptive thus allowing the movement of our bodies to remember and release.

A typical Kundalini yoga class is comprised of three parts: an opening chant (known as "tuning in") followed by a brief warm-up for your spine, a kriya (which is a sequence of postures paired with breathing techniques), and a closing meditation or song.