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Robert J. Damm

Mississippi State University, rdj6@msstate.edu

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Sharde Thomas and Mississippi Fife and Drum Band

By Robert J. Damm

The annual North Mississippi Hill Country Picnic celebrates the unique local music developed by departed blues legends such as Mississippi Fred McDowell, R. L. Burnside, Junior Kimbrough, and Otha Turner. The festival features many of the children and grandchildren of these legends including Sharde Thomas, granddaughter of Otha Turner, and present leader of the Rising Star Fife and Drum Band. This article is an introduction to and a snapshot of the current status of Mississippi hill country fife and drum music. I have included an interview I conducted with Sharde Thomas after her 2012 performance.

In the 18th century, military bands included many black musicians. During that time, there were restrictions against drumming by slaves for fear of rhythmic communication to orchestrate revolts. However, the fife and drum were exceptions, perhaps because of their patriotic association. It is well documented that Thomas Jefferson's slaves formed their own fife and drum group during the time of the Revolutionary War (Nicholson, 93). After Emancipation, drumming was no longer forbidden, and many more fife and drum bands were formed. Unlike fife and drum groups in military life, the Mississippi fife and drum bands played primarily for picnics and other social events. The instrumentation is typically one cane flute, two snare drums, and one bass drum. The foundational drum accompaniment consists of syncopated cross-rhythms with considerable variation and improvisation on set themes. Here is a typical foundational drum accompaniment.

Snare

Bass

Some sources indicate that Mississippi fife and drum music has direct roots in Africa. “Undoubtedly this African tradition [drumming] was in great part responsible for the popularity of the fife and drum band among blacks, and it would seem to have introduced considerable syncopation and polyrhythm into the drumming. Fife and drum ensembles are known in Africa...” (Evans, 6).

“The sound of a fife and drum band takes you back to the African roots... the country picnics of Mississippi’s hill country are the direct descendants of the unrestrained African celebrations” (Nicholson, 93). Alan Lomax first recorded this music in 1942 and described it in his book *The Land Where the Blues Began*: “an early phase of African-American music—not only that, but a clear revival of African tradition, kept alive in the Mississippi backwoods. As we have looked more deeply into the traditions of northeast Mississippi Hill country, we have found instruments, musical styles, and dancing that link the black South to the black Caribbean and, no question of it, to the dance of Africa as well (318).”

Roberts pointed out that “these bands appear to have derived from the European and Revolutionary War fife-and-drum bands. They are in fact not direct African survivals but further examples of a re-Africanization of European material through inherited and African-derived attitudes to music” (55).

In other words, the Mississippi fife and drum tradition is a result of



PHOTO COURTESY OF MARIA BRANT

Sharde Thomas

African Americans changing the Euro-American tradition through distinctly African performance practices including repetitive riff structures, syncopation, improvisation, and call-and-response.

The early leaders of the Mississippi fife and drum music included Sid Hemphill (1876–1963), Ed Young (1908–1974), Otha Turner (1908–2003), Napoleon Strickland (1919–2001), and Jessie Mae Hemphill (1923–2006). Jessie Mae is the granddaughter of Sid Hemphill; she played drums in his band. Otha Turner was one of the last practitioners of a tradition that many feared was on the verge of extinction. He played drums with fifer Napoleon Strickland; later, he played fife with his own Rising Star Band, which featured his daughter, Bernice Turner Pratcher, on drums. After Otha Turner’s death in 2003, his granddaughter, Sharde Thomas, became the leader of the band.

The 2012 North Mississippi Hill Country Picnic began around 5:00 p.m. on Friday, June 29. It took place out in a dusty field in Waterford, Mississippi. Several local bands played sets of blues or country music to an appreciative audience that sat in lawn chairs or danced near the stage. The fourth band to play included the son of R. L. Burnside on bass, the son of Junior Kimbrough on guitar, and the grandson of Junior Kimbrough on drums.

As the sun was going down around 8:30, Sharde Thomas and two drummers walked out to the field and began playing their call to celebration. Sharde gradually led the crowd of excited fans to the dance area. She and the drummers continued around to the steps at the back and came out onto the stage still playing their processional jam, a staple called “Bounce Ball.” Someone in the crowd shouted “Long live Otha Turner,” and Sharde echoed back in response, “Long live Otha Turner!”

The second song was a new one called “Back in the Day,” which featured lyrics about how Mississippi fife and drum bands started with Otha Turner “back in the day.” Sharde then led the crowd in singing the well-known play party “Little Sally Walker.” The band finished out its set with a cover of “Wild Thing,” a blues standard called “Station Blues,” and the spiritual “Glory, Glory Hallelujah.”

I met Sharde backstage as she was being congratulated by fans for her concert. She was showing someone her fife and explaining that it had been made and played by Otha Turner. Just as DeWayne Burnside's band finished a quick soundcheck and started to play, Sharde and I sat down for the following interview.

Robert Damm: *When and where do you perform with the Rising Star Fife and Drum Band?*

Sharde Thomas: Now it's like every weekend. I'm out of school on summer break. We usually do festivals. This is the first picnic of the year so far. The hotter it gets, the more picnics we have lined up. As the year goes on, we're gonna get deeper down in the delta. We've also been playing overseas with the Rising Stars.

RD: *How many drummers know how to play the drum rhythms for the style of music you perform?*

ST: Oh my goodness! I would say about five. I usually travel with two or three, but most of them are in school or working. We usually have two snares and one bass drum. Tonight the drummers were Aubrey Turner, my brother, and Michael Wooton.

RD: *Do you ever specify certain drum rhythms for your songs, or do you always leave it to the drummers to work out?*

ST: I show the guys how I want the beat to go. I am a drummer myself. I also play the drumset.

RD: *Are the songs you played tonight pretty standard for you?*

ST: Yes, they are pretty standard. "Wild Thing" and "Back in the Day" are kind of newer songs. We stay with what you call traditional. We ease in new ones from time to time.

RD: *What is your favorite song to sing or play?*

ST: "Little Sally Walker." It's been one of my favorites since I was real young.

RD: *What is your music background?*

ST: My mom said that when I was very young, I would walk through the house blowing the same tune on the harmonica. She said, "This girl is going to play music when she gets older," and I did. I started playing the drums when I was four or five. I started picking the music back up at the age of seven. That's when I started playing the fife—watching my granddad and wanting to be like him. I picked it up and he let me play. My first performance was at one of those picnics. I'm glad I started at a young age because it's a hard job to do. I started playing keyboard and writing songs at age 13. Once my grandfather passed, I had to get better at it and start taking matters into my own hands.

RD: *What was the first tune you ever played on fife?*

ST: I have no idea. I made up a song called "Back Atcha."

RD: *How do you describe your music?*

ST: It's unique, very different. You don't see many young people like me playing this type of music. Either they're doing rap or hip-hop. I do hip-hop too with a band called The Wandering, but it's still got the blues feel to it. I don't want to leave my fans hanging and jump to the hip-hop side.

RD: *Is the Rising Star the only active Mississippi fife and drum band in existence these days?*

ST: Yes sir, as far as I know.

RD: *I've seen YouTube footage of you in a parade with an added jembe drummer; do you sometimes like that added flavor?*

ST: Actually, I play the conga from time to time when we're marching.



Rising Star Fife and Drum Band

I pick the drum up and play it at picnics. I don't play it at festivals where we don't do much walking. But in Nashville when we do block parties, I'll play the conga and show the people what I can do outside of fife.

RD: *You are in photos for the Senegal to Senatobia recording sessions, and in the notes it was written that the CD was your recording debut. What do you remember about that project?*

ST: I remember playing a tune on it. When I play it now it's totally different. I didn't know what I was doing back then. I was so young. The older I get and the more I've learned, the stronger I can play.

RD: *The Senegal to Senatobia recording demonstrated the compatibility of West African and North Mississippi music. What are your thoughts on the connection?*

ST: All the Africans came down and we mixed it up together. It's basically the same to me. The fife and drum came from Africa. They play it in different styles; it's totally different than how we do it now. Hopefully, one day I can go over there and see how they do the fife and drum.

RD: *Do you think of Mississippi fife and drum music as African?*

ST: Not really because in Africa they have the true fife and drum. We have... I don't want to say bootleg, but the other version. It's totally different than how the Africans do it.

RD: *You played on the Corey Harris Mississippi to Mali recording. The CD was dedicated to Otha Turner, who died a week before he was scheduled to record for the album. You, at the age of 12, filled in for the session with the Rising Star Fife and Drum Band on two tracks. What did you learn from that project?*

ST: I was so young at the time. Back then, whatever my granddaddy did, I wanted to do, so I wanted to be on the record. It was a very good experience, and I'm glad I did it at a young age. Corey Harris used "Back Atcha" on the CD.

RD: *What role does fife and drum music play in your family and community today?*

ST: They love it. Personally, I'm still trying to keep the tradition going that my grandfather started. At the same time, I'm trying to get new

material out. I will always keep Otha Turner in there somewhere with that fife and drum. He started it. He's the head of it.

RD: *What influence did your mom have on Rising Star, and is she a drummer?*

ST: She goes everywhere we go to manage things; she's here tonight. She's not a drummer, but she sang when she was younger.

RD: *Having recently completed your first solo CD project, what can you say about What Do I Do?*

ST: We have a lot of fife and drum music on there, a lot of keyboard, and a lot of blues. My brother Aubrey wrote two of the blues songs. There's a song called "O. T." that I dedicated to my grandfather. I wish he could have heard it. I dedicated the whole CD to my grandfather and my Aunt Bernice. Those two died on the same day [in 2003]. Recording was a very emotional experience; every minute I had to stop and cry. I got through with it, and it turned out to be a great CD. Now I'm working on my second CD.

RD: *You thanked your haters for the motivation. Who are your haters?*

ST: People at school who said [about me], "Since she plays music she's getting a big head." You know how teenagers are. I didn't let it get to me. When they said something negative, that motivated me to do something positive.

RD: *You thanked your fans for the joy they bring you. Who are your fans?*

ST: Everyone that's been with me since day one. The people that started with me at age seven, even though I didn't know what I was doing. They're sticking around to this day.

RD: *What role did your Aunt Bernice play in your life and music?*

ST: She was like my second mom. She went everywhere with my grandfather and me. She booked all the shows, and she really pushed me out there as a young girl. She was right there with me, and I would like to thank her. She's truly been missed.

RD: *What would you like to say about Otha Turner that hasn't already been said?*

ST: He already knows that I love him. I truly miss him. I wish he was here today to see how far we've come from playing little picnics to playing overseas for people we've never seen before. Every time that I wanted to drop the band and look on to something else I could hear him say, "No, you need to keep going." I would never ever stop playing the fife. Hopefully, when I'm 90 years old, I will still be able to play the fife.

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SUGGESTED RECORDINGS

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- Mitchell, George and Evans, David (1995). *Traveling Through the Jungle* (Hightone Records). Fife and drum band music from the deep south featuring field recordings made in 1969 and 1970 of the most well-known fifers including Ephram Carter, Lucius Smith, J. W. Jones, Napoleon Strickland, Fred McDowell, Compton Jones, and Otha Turner.

- Thomas, Sharde (2010). *What Do I Do?* (Sharde). Sharde's debut CD dedicated to Otha Turner and Bernice Turner. Five of the tracks are fife and drum pieces.
- Turner, Otha & The Afrosippi Allstars (1999). *Senegal to Senatobia* (Birdman Records). Fife and drum music combined with African music.
- Turner, Otha and The Rising Star Fife & Drum Band (1998). *Everybody Hollerin' Goat* (Birdman Records). Field recordings of fife and drum music (plus a few blues guitar tracks) played at picnics at Turner's home in Mississippi.

VIDEO LINKS

- Otha Turner and Sharde Thomas (recorded circa 1995): www.youtube.com/watch?v=tT1XzVhwzUs&feature=related
- Rising Star Fife & Drum Band, "Station Blues," North Mississippi Hill Country Picnic 2010, Sharde Thomas on fife and vocals: www.youtube.com/watch?v=IUjxGra9uBw
- Sharde Thomas, What Do I Do? Album introduction video, photo montage for Sharde Thomas's debut CD: www.youtube.com/watch?v=cR_iYWg0Zjk

Robert J. Damm is Professor of Music and Director of Music Education Partnerships at Mississippi State University. He has studied music and dance in Cuba, Ghana, and Mali. His original compositions are published by Honey-Rock and HaMaR. He has served as President of the Mississippi PAS chapter.

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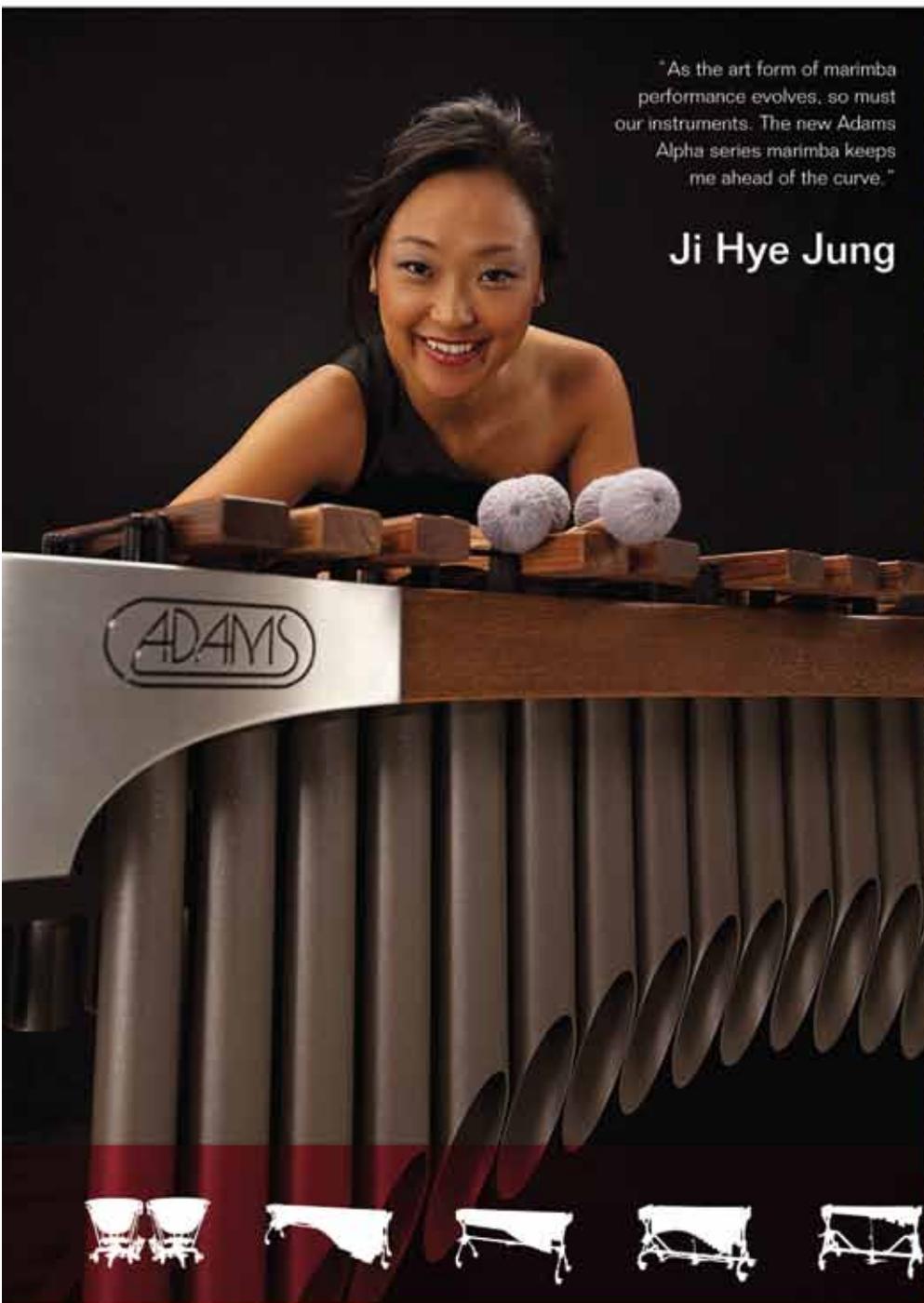
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