

Mickey Hart

Seeking the Rhythm of the Universe

Though most well-known for his almost 30 years as a drummer for the Grateful Dead, Mickey Hart of Local 6 (San Francisco, CA) has built a name for himself as an explorer of music and music cultures worldwide. But, his latest project has taken him even further, on a quest to discover the rhythm of our universe.

Hart has been exploring and collecting rhythm and grooves for his entire life. Today, the man who says that he never seriously entertained the idea of being anything but a drummer while growing up, is also an ethnomusicologist, music therapist, and even a scientist.

From his earliest days with the Dead, Hart incorporated a wide range of percussion instruments he collected from every corner of the world. The more he explored these instruments and the cultures they come from, the more he sought out the true meaning of the vibrations and rhythms found in every aspect of our lives.

Collecting World Rhythms

As he learned about these cultures, he recorded and documented the music he found. In October of last year, 25 albums from his collection were digitized and released by the nonprofit Smithsonian Folkways Recordings—everything from *The Travelling Jewish Wedding to Voices of the Rainforest* recorded in Papua New Guinea.

“These are really my field recordings from my whole life,” says Hart. “A lot of these cultures are in danger, and some of them have completely disappeared. Some of these are the rarest music on the planet, so putting them back into circulation, on the highest level, is what I wanted to do, and I wanted it all in one place.”



“These recordings contain thousands of years of evolution of a people—their hopes, their dreams, their fears, who they are, what they were, everything about them, or us, is contained in music,” explains Hart. “That’s why it’s important to preserve the music and that it goes back to the communities that lost it by war or missionization. They love it! It’s like a long-lost relative coming back—repatriated.”

And those 25 albums are only the beginning, according to Hart. “I’ve got hundreds and hundreds,” he says. “Maybe next year I will curate some more.”

Through these cultural explorations, Hart continued to trace music and rhythm back further and further towards its roots. “Back in the ’90s I wrote some books [*Drumming at the Edge of Magic*, *Planet Drum*, *Spirit into Sound: The Magic of Music*, and *Songcatchers: In Search of the World’s Music*] that talked about where the rhythm and groove came from—what’s it all about and what’s our place in the universe,” he says. “It’s an itch I’ve been trying to scratch for a long time.”

Sonification of Creation

“I was tracing the history of the groove of music back, and wound up at the big bang, where the vibrations first started, and that was 13.7 billion years ago,” he continues. “There were no machines to really read the big bang until the late ’90s. Then, [in 2006] Dr. George Smoot won the Nobel prize for his discovery of it.”

“I wanted to have a conversation with the cosmos,” says Hart. So, in his search for the very first vibrations, he contacted none other than Smoot to find out how to set the big bang to music. “It’s about sampling the epic events that created the galaxy, sun, moon, earth, the planets, the stars—all things that happened sequentially that made us human, and gave us connections to vibrations.”

The scientists were quite intrigued by Hart’s ideas, and for the past three years they’ve been working together “sonifying” light rays gathered from radio telescopes all over the planet. “You see, there’s no sounds in space because it’s a vacuum,” Hart explains the process. “It reaches us as light waves and we gather it, put it in the computer, and change its form from light to sound—sonification. When I get it, it’s raw and noisy, there’s lots of bumps and grinds, a lot of chirping, pulsing, and collisions.”

“The first sound, the down beat, the big bang, is a b-flat,” adds Hart. “It sounds like a big jet flying real low. Earth is a giant bell. It resonates and has its tectonic plates, lots of things that make it vibratory.”

“So what is the interest for me?” asks Hart. “It’s the rhythm of things that holds everything together. Music is about vibrations, rhythms, and the sounds of the universe that spawned us all. Robert Hunter [who also wrote songs for the Grateful Dead] wrote songs to it and it became a dance.”

Mysterium Tremendum

The resulting album, *Mysterium Tremendum*, to be released April 10, marries the music of the universe with man-made music. “There are lots of great rhythms, and lots of great songs,” says Hart. “We are trying to have a conversation, trying to make musical sense out of it, and also make people aware that we are using science in our art.”

“It’s taken a long time to create this stellar library, to gather all these sounds,” Hart says, of his first new album in five years. Of course, the resulting *Above the Clouds* tour for the Mickey Hart Band will also include plenty of classic Grateful Dead hits, along with cutting-edge technology like an instrument that Hart calls RAMU, for random access musical universe.

“I created it,” he says. “It’s probably the most powerful percussion performance instrument on the planet. It’s a computer and it’s tactile, so it’s a sound droid and it’s drums. I’m in the middle of these two worlds.”

“The idea of what a musician really needs to know to be current and visionary is changing,” adds Hart. “You have great powerful machines that can see the micro and the macro at the cellular level, and you can see back to the beginning of time—that’s an enormous lens.”

He is also working with Smoot on a DVD for the IMAX theater at the Smithsonian.

“*Mysterium Tremendum* is all about going to the unknown and finding out things you didn’t know,” says Hart, explaining the album’s title. “To me it is about the tremendous mystery of life, and how things work, and if you don’t understand sound, vibration, spheres, gravity, rhythm, movement, and flow—all the things really innate in music, then you really can’t understand life.”

“It makes you ponder the larger truth: are we pulsing and spinning at an atomic level

or are we vibrating creatures in a dance with the vibrating universe?” asks Hart. “Who knows the innate powers that lie in music, if we know how to deal with it?”

Implications for Humanity

And that thought leads to one of Hart’s other passions—music therapy. “Who knows the remedies that lie in sound?” he adds. “We know it heals in some way and it enhances life, but how has music become medicine?”

Hart, who sits on the “Music and the Brain” board at the Institute for Music and Neurologic Function at Beth Abraham Hospital, first became interested in music therapy during a visit with his grandmother who suffered from Alzheimer’s disease. “She couldn’t talk for six or eight months and I played a small drum for like 10 minutes and she said my name,” explains Hart. “She said it multiple times and I realized that the rhythm of the vibration somehow allowed her to reconnect and speak. When I stopped playing she couldn’t speak.”

After that experience, in 1991 he teamed up with renowned neurologist and psychologist Oliver Sacks and the pair testified before Congress and received a music therapy grant from the Senate Committee on Aging. They organized giant drum circles and sponsored music therapy programs.

Last year, Hart was involved in the release of the film *The Music Never Stopped*, about a young man passionate about music who is noncommunicative and trapped in the ’60s after a traumatic brain injury. Based on a true study by Sacks, the doctor uses the music of the Grateful Dead to reach his patient.

Aside from these examples, 68-year-old Hart sees what music has done for him in respect to his own life. “Music is the elixir of life,” he laughs. “It keeps you energized. It’s all about the imagination and the spirit world, so even if you abuse yourself a little bit, music is the perfect remedy for all that.”

And what’s Hart’s next big project? “I’m working on sonifying the Golden Gate Bridge,” he explains matter-of-factly. “The 75th anniversary is May 27th, and I’ve decided to sonify the bridge. I’ve taken readings of the whole bridge, and I’m transferring it into sound for its birthday.”

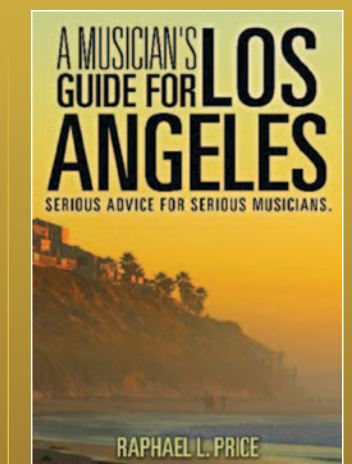
Hart says he’s thought about this project, which is now in the planning stages, for 40 years. “I’ve always wanted to hear what that giant wind harp sitting in the breeze would sound like.”

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