

THE RHYTHM OF GIVING BACK

Steven Angel works the education beat

BY JAE MARGARET MICHAELS

ELECTRIFYING! RIVETING! TRANSFORMATIVE!

It only takes a few rhythmic taps on a drumhead for Steven Angel to cast a spell over his audience. There's unequivocal genius at work when he plays. His drumming is not only heard but felt. He whisks his listeners away on a journey of sound as breathless as a roller-coaster ride.

His gifts come naturally. Angel, 54, has more than five decades of experience as a drummer—a pursuit that began at age 3 and evolved into a career by age 7.

Angel quickly drummed his way into the inner circles of the musical elite, playing with legendary musicians like Buddy Rich and Jimi Hendrix. It turned out to be an emotionally unsustainable success.

"I just crashed," he says. "I went into a deep depression at 20."

Eventually, Angel turned to writing songs. His first, "Angel's Rejoice," was the start of a Broadway musical that caught the attention of Leonard Bernstein. Despite encouragement from such a luminary, Angel never completed it.

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"I was always interested in exploring, but I wasn't interested in being successful," Angel recalls. "When I got into my late 30s, I realized that I had to turn my life around. I finally got to a place where I knew I wanted to get back to drumming."

Angel's return to his passion marked a significant departure from his rock-star roots. He had an "a-ha moment" that he could connect psychology and drumming. The realization took hold of his psyche, triggering intense study of psychology, shamanism, and brain research. Then, he took what he learned and, as he puts it, "shook it up."

"It was always very important for me to create my own thing."

His creative connections between drumming and healing, drumming and education, and drumming and emotions have led him to trailblazing solutions for cancer patients, veterans

suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, underachieving students, and delinquent children.

In 2001, Angel began developing programs to address educational woes by collaborating with a fifth-grade teacher at Westminster Avenue Elementary School in Venice, California.

Although she was a good teacher, Angel reports that her students had the lowest scores in their grade level. After four months of incorporating a simple regimen of drumming using just their school books, her class went from having "the lowest scores in the grade to the highest scores in the grade for every category,"

The next year, the program was refined and tested with control classrooms. After just four weeks, scores shot up by 50 percent. Teachers reported seeing a difference not only in their students' reading abilities but also in their whole attitude.

Even with verifiable improvements and legions of positive testimonials from school children, Angel struggles to get the word out about his programs.

"We keep hoping that it's going to change and that people will catch on and join us, but it's been a battle," he admits.

Despite the challenges, Angel has plans to launch a charter school in Los Angeles through his Drumming for Your Life Foundation (www.dfyl.org) by September 2009.

"What it does is allow you, really from the get-go, to develop a different kind of child," he explains. "When a child grows up in the world where the conscious and the unconscious mind is always integrated ... where the intellect, the creative mind, and the emotional body are all in sync and all empowered, it's a very, very powerful place to live." 🎧



