

Instrument of Change

Los Angeles Times

Tuesday November 23, 1999 Section E3
Copyright 2002 / The Los Angeles Times

Giving

A weekly look at those who help.

A former prodigy with ill-fated dreams of fame and fortune, Steve Angel now shows others how to let go of pain and anger through drumming.



INSTRUMENT OF SALVATION

By Duane Noriyuki
TIMES STAFF WRITER

A 16-year old boy sits hammering a drum at Camp Karl Holton, a Los Angeles County juvenile probation facility in San Fernando. He swings a mallet first with his left hand, then with his right, then furiously with both.

He is thinking about his brother and sister, killed three years ago in a gang-related shooting. The tip of one mallet goes flying. A blister the size of a dime forms in the fold of his left hand.

Sitting at the far end of the circle is Mario, 18. He strikes the drum with less force. Most of his anger, he says, is gone. The scar on his left cheek was left by a bullet, but he says he's through with the streets. He's going home soon. This time, he says, he's not coming back.

The anger and regret of 11 boys with drums sound like thunder and look like battle. The drumming diminishes gradually, and when it ends, there are exhausted smiles, heaving chests. Silence.

"Good," says Steven Angel.

Angel, 46, is founder of Drumming for Your Life, a musical approach to the health and healing of mind, body and spirit based in Santa Monica. A child prodigy, who performed at age 6 with the legendary Buddy Rich looking on, Angel spent most of his life on the fringe of stardom.

Two years ago, he started the drum therapy program, which has been used by cancer patients, yoga students, men's groups, high school students—anyone harboring emotions trying to emerge.

For the boys at Camp Holton, it is a chance to express feelings that words alone cannot. Incorporated into the music program by volunteer instructor Fletcher Beasley, drum therapy serves as a vent and as a bond.

"There's a lot of anger, resignation to the way things are in the world," Beasley says. "There's a lot of sadness and fear. A lot of that is lifted from them by this program."

Mario says he feels good at the end of the one-hour session, although he isn't sure exactly what it is about the drums that makes him feel that way.

"You get everything out," he says. "You let out some stuff you don't even think about. It's weird."

Giving Voice to His Innermost Feelings



For Angel, the drums initially were something to be mastered, controlled. They eventually became a form of meditation, delivering him to a place deep within, where motion, sound and spirit intertwined and soared.

He remembers leaving the stage of the Whisky years ago without even realizing his forearms were slashed and bleeding, the legs of his pants ripped. At moments, the drums, drugs, passion and fear seemed to explode on stage. He performed like a tornado passing through wind chimes.

Through Drumming for Your Life, he seeks to make the drums reflective of what beats within. It gives motion and sound to thoughts and feelings.

Like the boys at Camp Holton, Angel's life began to unravel early. It started the day Jimi Hendrix died.

Angel was preparing to give a book report for English class when a friend ran up to him at Hewlett High School on Long Island.

"Did you hear?" the friend asked.

"Hear what?" replied Angel. He was scheduled to be at Electric Lady Studios later that day to finish work on a project headed by Noel Redding, who performed with Hendrix.

Redding had gathered various musicians including Angel and Hendrix for a song titled "My Friend." Hendrix was so impressed by Angel's abilities that he asked him to play on an album he was planning following a 1970 tour.

On Sept. 18 of that year, however, tragic news came to Angel.

"Jimi died," his friend said.

He gave his book report, then rushed to a pay phone to call his mother. Yes, she said, it was true. Angel fell to his knees and sobbed.

"I knew the whole thing was over," he says. "That was the beginning of the end because all the sudden, I wasn't going to be a star anymore."

Angel was 17 years old.



Photo courtesy of Steven Angel

"It has become my bliss. It's all based on pulse, mind, body, soul synchronization, using the drums to express and release emotions—anger, fear, guilt, shame."

Steven Angel
Founder of
Drumming for Your Life

He had started playing the drums at 3. His parents would host card parties, and he would entertain the adults, playing to records or along with Desi Arnaz as Ricky Ricardo on the "I Love Lucy" show.

By age 4, he was taking lessons. His father, Morris Angel, wanted better lives for his three sons. Having traveled alone to the United States from Greece at age 10, he lived in an orphanage for six years.

Morris Angel served in the military, then started working in a business that made drapes and curtains. Eventually he started his own similar business. His first son, Dennis, played trumpet. Robert learned the accordion. Then came Steven.

Steven Angel's first performance was at a club in New York, where he played "When the Saints Go Marching In" with Buddy Rich looking on. At 8, he and his brothers were in a band that performed on the "The Ted Mack Family Hour."

In 1965, when Angel was 11, the band won a competition in New York. Billy Joel's group came in second. Later that year, the boys' band, which became known as 3 1/2 (Steven Angel was the half) opened for the Young Rascals and Lovin' Spoonful at the New York Coliseum, and soon afterward toured with the Animals and Herman's Hermits.

The band left the tour for a brief period and took on a new singer, Jeff Conaway, who later played Bobby Wheeler in the television series "Taxi."
By 18, His Star
Was Falling

The child drumming sensation was growing into a young man. He continued playing music but age no longer made him unique. He was no longer the star. The album with Redding and Hendrix was never released. It was an era of drugs, sex and rock 'n' roll. Angel took on a steady diet of all three.

"By the time I was 18," he says, "people were asking me, 'What ever happened to you?'"

This day, Angel introduces himself to a group of marriage and family therapists meeting at the Torrance Memorial Medical Center. He begins by showing them how to hold the mallets. They start with a simple rhythm. One, two, three, four. Then, one and two, three, four.

Initially, it seems they are performing, measuring their beats carefully. As they move through the exercises, however, they fall into their own rhythms.

Angel asks them to close their eyes in search of painful moments from their pasts, pieces of their lives that have not healed. For 30 seconds there is silence.

Janice Held sees the face of her stepfather. She remembers his glare and the nights he locked her in her room until morning. Anger from deep within emerges to the surface. She begins beating the drum, faster, harder. She visualizes his face on the drum head and pounds furiously.

Across the room, Hilary Henson sees the faces of two men who raped her as a teenager. The image is clear as she sits on the floor, her red hair falling forward as she pounds with heavy strokes.

Minutes pass and the faces of two men begin to fade from her consciousness and then they are gone. For now, gone.

She opens her eyes.

"I saw their faces, and I beat back, and then I did it as hard as I could, to the point where it was painful holding the sticks. It was feeling it in my body and being able to say, 'I don't want to hold it in anymore?...It takes a long time to be whole again.'"

Later, Angel, takes them on a journey, using the drums and visualization. Henson thinks back to when she was 10 and she and a friend studied the stars and felt like tiny specks in a boundless universe.

Then she focuses on a night in August when she and her husband sat in a mineral hot springs along the coast and gazed at the sky. They saw a shooting star flare like a missile through darkness. The beat of the drum dances with her heart.

There are moments when all 16 participants settle from chaos into a shared rhythm, a feeling of cohesiveness.

A Journey Back From the Depths



The drums take Angel back to his childhood, where guilt lived for many years.

"I was supposed to be the savior for my family, and it didn't happen," he says. "The memory of that stays with me, that I didn't come through for everybody."

Angel moved to L.A. at 19. He gave music another shot but eventually went into seclusion, suffering from depression and drug abuse. He played at small clubs around town for \$20 a night.

He wrote a musical, but like so much of his life, things didn't pan out. Ten years ago, he started therapy and says he began to understand his life.

He came upon the idea of Drumming for Your Life and started talking to therapists about it, reading, developing a curriculum.

"It has become my bliss," he says. "It's all based on pulse, mind, body, soul synchronization, using the drums to express and release emotions—anger, fear, guilt, shame. Then rejuvenation, stimulation, motivation, tapping into clarity of purpose, healing."

His goal is to perform "healing concerts" for a larger audience. He still composes and does studio work, but drums have taken him beyond music into the darkness and light within.

- For information about Drumming for Your Life, call (310) 453-2348 or visit the Web site at <http://www.stevenangel.com>.
- Duane Noriyuki can be reached by e-mail at duane.noriyuki@latimes.com.

Note: May not be reproduced or retransmitted without permission. For permission call the Los Angeles Times at 800-528-4637 Ext. 74914. The sale of this reprint does not constitute or imply the publisher's endorsement of any product, service, company, individual or organization.