



The beat comes home

BY GODFREY SMITH

Jazz was born in Africa — and now Cape Town is grooving again

Oh you take some skins..." sings Bing Crosby in the film *High Society* — on cue, Louis Armstrong's drummer, Barrett Deems, starts a thrilling susurrus behind him — "...and jazz begins." Nowhere is the spell of the drum, that symbol of freedom and harbinger of joy, stronger than in Africa. Here, after all, the men who first gave America jazz were born. At the Drum Cafe in downtown Cape Town, mecca of South African jazz, that ancient magic is re-enacted each Monday, Wednesday and Friday night, as seven young black drummers, recruited from all ends of Africa, line a low stage, with a dynamic white girl, Kelly Schlesinger, in the middle.

At 9pm they begin their pounding beat to the concentric semicircles of young people seated facing them, who respond to each thumping sally on *djembe* drums of their own. Some they have hired for the evening for £2, some are drums bought from the store there for anything up to £90. Slowly, the beat gets more complex, but each time the young people drum back with exhilarating fidelity. It doesn't take more than 20 minutes to pick up the beat.

The club's been going for seven years now. On Thursday there's a women's drum circle, where a more gentle and sensitive approach to drumming is heard. Women are more concerned not with how loud they can play, but with how right they can get it. (Men are welcome on Thursday after 10.30pm.) On Saturday a wide spectrum of live bands from South and West Africa sit in and play along to the intoxicating beat.

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The reverberations have rippled out to win unexpected aficionados; drum circles are now an integral part of corporate training. Any number of delegates from 10 to 3,000 can take part in 60-minute sessions in a boardroom or conference hall. Corporate drumming, they find, breaks down barriers of age, gender, religion, race, rank and disability. It helps build teams and launch products. Drum Cafe has a London office and is now a global business. Ecstatic feedback flows in from unlikely sources. "It was great," enthuses Barclays Bank, "to have our executive committee members and guests drumming to the same beat."