

Through music, FSU professor escapes to Brazil

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Music sits somewhere within the realms of escape and transcendence for Dr. Michael Bakan, a professor of ethnomusicology at Florida State University. When he sits to play, he feels himself go into a heightened state where the groove of the music moves his head in circles, lurching his body along with its rhythms, eyes closed, face turned upwards.

"Sometimes I get teased about how funny I look, and I agree when I see it on video," laughed Bakan, who's become particularly transported by Brazilian music and artists. "It has this incredibly deep, rich rhythm and these lush harmonies that go on and on. Where western music revolves around three or four chords, Brazilian composers are able to make harmonic progressions that are ridiculously complex, but are put together in a way that touches you in a basic, emotional place."

Every Tuesday evening at The Blue Tavern, Bakan comes together with a cohort of musicians in the hopes of giving Tallahassee a similarly full experience via their weekly performance: Roda Vibe! Roda, pronounced 'hoda' as per its Portuguese origins, translates to 'hoda' in the phrase "roda de choro." Choro is the genre of Brazilian music, often heard in the bars, clubs, or late night venues in Rio de Janeiro. As a drummer, Bakan plays a specific role, keeping the beat while letting the music unfold and the other musicians improvise around him.

"You've heard it if you listened to old American cartoons like Bugs Bunny or Road Runner because they would hire these musicians," elaborates Bakan. "It combines elements of Brazilian samba with western classical music and jazz. Some of the songs are much more sentimental and dark sounding, but overall it's an uplifting music, enjoyable to listen to, and accessible."

As head of the World Music Ensembles Program at FSU, and director of the Sekaa Gong Hanuman Agung Balinese Gamelan and Omnimusic Intercultural ensembles, Bakan's knowledge and appetite for world music is vast. Recently forming the Bakan-Margut-Hall World Trio, he has also published the textbook "World Music: Traditions and Transformations" that is taught in universities worldwide, and crafted his own definition of the field that focuses on how "people make and experience music, and why it matters to them that they do."

"Culture has become so complex and hard to pin down that it makes a lot more sense to locate the investigation on individual people and how they make and experience music," says Bakan. "I think we always want the primary voice to be the voice of the person who the study is about."

His earliest musical awakening occurred at age three while listening to The Beatles' "Eight Days a Week," as the song's crescendo sent shivers up his spine. A year later his parent's found a disassembled drum in a local thrift shop. They brought it home and a neighborhood friend helped put it back together.

From that point on, Bakan could always be found in his family's basement, festooned in his Sergeant Pepper's suit playing on his first drum kit to whatever Beatles record happened to be on the turntable. A short stint in his brother's rock band solidified his connection with the instrument, and by age eleven Bakan was taking drum lessons from a former mathematics professor, Micky Earnshaw who introduced him to a radical method of playing music.

"He was an amazing drummer and musical mind," recalls Bakan. "He would write out in long hand all the possible permutations and combinations of each note, then he'd figure out how to play them all against each other. The whole approach became influential on my compositions later, and even now when I'm playing other kinds of music and composing, those formative experiences are my foundation."

"Transitioning into jazz and classical percussion, Bakan attributes his skill and technique to lessons with instructors like John Rudolph, principal percussionist with the Vancouver Symphony. When he saw Russell Hartenberger perform as part of the group Nexus in a West African ensemble, Bakan was inspired by the University of Toronto percussion professor and decided to pursue his bachelor's at the university.

While in school, Bakan embraced Toronto's rich musical and multicultural scene and played in everything from a traditional Chinese orchestra to a reggae band. After a setback in his health that sidelined his drumming, Bakan pursued a degree in ethnomusicology from UCLA, shifting his perspective on what playing music means to him.

"The older I've gotten the more I've realized that my joy in playing is not in me manifesting myself as a musician," says Bakan. "I'm more interested in being there to support and lift up the people I'm playing with and in doing so, share something with the people who are there to listen and they can all feel like they're part of that experience."

Raw human experience is always at the forefront for Bakan, and that was the first aspect of a Brazilian choro music performance that he connected with on a trip to Brazil in 2015.

Developed in late 19th century and paralleling the evolution of early jazz, roda de choro consists of a small group of musicians playing around a table, with



Bakan, right, stands with pianist Mason Margut and bassist Brian Hall. Together, the three make up the Bakan-Margut-Hall World Trio.

LEAH BAKAN



Roda Vibe performs every Tuesday at Blue Tavern.

MARGIE BERTRAM

their guitars, mandolins, flutes, violins, and pandeiros (tambourines). It was on that trip that he met Roece Ben Sira, an Israeli virtuoso and choro musician. Striking up a friendship, Bakan brought Sira to FSU's College of Music as an artist in residence. Sira wanted to bring an authentic roda experience to north Florida.

"Providing an informal space for people to eat, drink, talk, and play are at the heart of the gatherings, and the events have been wildly successful even after Sira's departure. Musicians range from community members to music students, and the Blue Tavern has become the perfect home for the performances as it supports an acoustic music atmosphere. Bakan is proud to continue Sira's dream of creating a sustainable culture for choro music and is excited about the event's continual growth.

"I look forward to every Tuesday," said Bakan. "The people are there, hanging out, listening and having a good time. It's a unique experience where you can delve into another cultural and musical way of being in a really comfortable and unintimidating way. It's become a kind of a family."

Amanda Sieradzki is the feature writer for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area's umbrella agency for arts and culture (www.tallahasseearts.org).



If you go

What: Roda Vibe!
When: 8-10 p.m. every Tuesday
Where: Blue Tavern, 1206 N Monroe St
Cost: Free
Contact: For more information, visit <https://www.facebook.com/events/1874844589504239/>.



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