



## Sho' Time

A local beatboxer takes his skills to new heights, and new audiences, by performing with everyone from the BSO to Ethel Ennis.

By John Lewis

**Towson University's Fine Arts Building** is relatively quiet on a Tuesday afternoon. That is, until you open the door leading to the dance studios on the first floor. Immediately, booming music fills the hallway, ricochets off the cinderblock walls, and gets louder as you approach room 1004, where a few dozen dancers in leotards and shorts pirouette, bend, and leap in time to the rhythm.

The music exudes an intensity and visceral wallop that no CD player could match. It sounds like some sort of percussion orchestra, but there's no group in sight. A solitary figure, dressed entirely in black, sits in the corner with overturned buckets and a hubcap positioned around him. With a stick in his right hand, he taps out skittering rhythms on the buckets, hubcap, and, occasionally, on a nearby heating grate. With his left hand, he holds a microphone to his mouth and emits blasts of expansive beats into it. They build, modulate, and crescendo into waves that seem to buoy and carry the dancers across the room, as instructor Linda-Denise Fisher-Harrell shouts comments and encouragement.

Shodekeh, a local beatboxer with a knack for turning up in unlikely places, is the accompanist for Fisher-Harrell's modern dance class. He also accompanies jazz, improv, and ballet classes at Towson, where he works five days a week.

After Shodekeh (pronounced Sho-dah-kay) winds down the music, he unplugs his mic and begins stacking the buckets, as the dancers file out of the room looking both fatigued and satisfied. "We love it," says senior dance major Ashley Hulek. "You can actually feel the pulse in his music. We feed off of that, and it energizes the entire class. It's the perfect accompaniment for what we do."

Vincent Thomas, the dance instructor who hired Shodekeh at Towson, concurs. "By using his voice as his instrument," notes Thomas, "he has the ability to tap into the innermost essence of being human—breath."

Looking a bit winded himself, Shodekeh stows his gear in a closet across the hall and retreats to the faculty offices for a sip of water. He speaks softly, smiles easily, and laughs heartily, but he's deadly serious when talking about music. "This class is my favorite place to play music," he says. "It isn't a performance, but it's work—they're in there to work—and I'm there to support them. The whole thing is like a meditation

on improvement and challenging yourself, and I really enjoy putting myself in those types of situations. In fact, I thrive on it."

The 33-year-old Hamilton resident—who bills himself as "a vocal drummer of World genres, families, and traditions"—has, indeed, put himself in a wide variety of challenging musical situations. He has performed with the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra (BSO), Ethel Ennis, hip-hop legend KRS-1, a bluegrass band, Lithuanian folk singers, and opera singers. He's appeared at the American Dance Festival at Duke University, American Visionary Art Museum (AVAM), the Conference on World Affairs in Boulder, CO, and the High Zero Festival of Experimental Improvised Music here in Baltimore. He's collaborated with Johns Hopkins researcher Charles Limb on a project involving improvisation and neuroscience, and he just won a 2011 Baker Artist Award, which netted him a \$25,000 prize.

But when asked if he ever envisioned himself beatboxing at Towson University, where he's worked since 2006, he chuckles: "Never in a million years. I could see myself working with breakdancers, sure, but I never thought I'd be beatboxing in this type of environment. It's shown me that your opportunities are limitless, if you're open to them."

DOMINIC SHODEKEH TALIFERO GREW UP IN Prince George's County, watching the bucket drummers and percussionists in go-go bands that were part of the region's vibrant music scene. He claims Booker T. Washington as an ancestor—the T stood for Taliaferro, and the spelling evolved over the years—and has long related to Washington's inquisitive nature and work ethic.

His mother, who came from Sierra Leone, ran a commercial cleaning company in the D.C. area. During the summers, Shodekeh and his three siblings would vacuum, dust, and empty trashcans at sites such as the New Executive Office Building near the White House and Providence Hospital, where he was born. "She definitely taught me the importance of getting up and getting to work," he says.

His parents also liked to have a good time. "They took me along to a lot of social functions," he recalls, "where people were danc-

THE BELLMOOR.COM  
302-227-5800  
800-425-2355  
REHOBOTH BEACH

THE BELLMOOR  
INN • SPA • GARDENS

SELECT REGISTERED BY TRAVEL AGENTS  
ZAGAT RATED

gobaltimoreDeals

OFFERING THE DEALS THAT YOU WANT MOST

Get Amazing Deals!  
Offered by local Baltimore & Annapolis businesses for 50%-80% OFF restaurants, spas, health & fitness & more delivered directly to your email daily!

Find us on Facebook

Sign up NOW for FREE by entering your email at [www.gobaltimoredeals.com](http://www.gobaltimoredeals.com)



Your Website



Our Video



MORE  
BUSINESS



Exceptional Video  
Marketing Solutions

www.sfnewmedia.com  
410.504.7462

People trust what they know.  
Help them get to know you.

## arts

ing to reggae, soca, and West African music. That's where I got my sense of a steady beat."

He asked for a drumset when he was four years old, but his folks nixed that idea. So when that rhythmic impulse got too strong to deny, he started using his voice. As a youngster, he developed an uncanny ability to mimic sounds from movies and cartoons. "It was mostly for my own entertainment," he says, "while I was playing with toys, with my

### "I'm continuing my education by forcing myself into musical situations that are foreign to me."

mini-Millennium Falcon. I got really good at doing vocal impressions, and that became a steppingstone to beatboxing."

It was a natural progression. Associated primarily with hip-hop, beatboxing is the art of replicating percussion and other musical sounds with the human voice, and groundbreaking artists such as Scratch, Rahzel, and Kenny Muhammad made a huge impression on Shodekeh. "I was blown away by those guys," he says, "and I became a student of beatboxing."

His quasi-professorial comments about beatboxing illustrate the point: "It's all air friction. . . . It's molecular air bending. . . . Every vocalist is a scientist."

A self-described "late bloomer and hands-on learner," Shodekeh graduated from Suitland High School—a visual and performing arts school, where he "did pretty well"—and went on to Penn State—where he didn't do so well. "I was more focused on the radio show I hosted than I was on my studies," he admits. "I was also in an a cappella group and a beatbox group, so I was always out performing and getting into as much musical trouble as I could."

He eventually dropped out and moved to Baltimore, where he enrolled at Coppin. "And I did the same shit all over again," he says.

In 2004, Shodekeh decided to concentrate on music and "create my own education," he says, which also meant getting work

to support himself. He waited tables at Downtown Sports Exchange, worked the door at a strip club, temped at the Maryland Zoo in Baltimore, ushered at the Meyerhoff during BSO concerts, and eventually got the accompanist gig at Towson.

Around that time, he began performing with a wildly diverse range of musicians. "I'm good at hustling and getting gigs," he says, "and I try to plant as many seeds as possible. I'm continuing my education by forcing myself into musical situations that are foreign to me to see if I can adapt, create, and flourish. In most cases, I've managed to be successful."

SHODEKEH PERFORMED WITH ETHEL ENNIS AND her trio at the Creative Alliance last year. "I'd had my eye on her for awhile," he says. "She has a lot of musical tricks up her sleeve."

"It took Ethel out of her comfort zone," says her husband, Earl Arnett.

"But it was improvisation, and I've done a lot of that over the years," adds Ennis. "You know, beatboxing is really just a new name for something that's very old. People have always been making music with just their voices, making music from nothing. But Shodekeh is particularly good at it. He's very musical and very adaptable."

"His show with Ethel Ennis had folks talking for months," says Creative Alliance program director Megan Hamilton. "The breadth of his collaborations is truly staggering."

That's never been more apparent than when Shodekeh appeared with the BSO last July. He soloed during Jan Mikael Vainio's *Fujiko's Fairy Tale* concerto, a contemporary piece written for strings and beatboxer. He also opened the second half of the concert with beatbox improvisations that prefaced Philip Glass's *Heroes Symphony*. During that segment, he actually took the baton from Marin Alsop and, from the podium, led the orchestra and audience in a sort of call-and-response improv that led into the Glass piece.

"When I was working as an usher, I had daydreams of being onstage with the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra," says Shodekeh, "so it was really a dream come true. There's something really special about bridging the gap between what I do and what they have to offer."

Alsop calls Shodekeh "a truly gifted, charismatic performer and musician," who has

"appeal across demographics." Alsop was so impressed with him that she's "leading a consortium to have a new concerto written specifically for [Shodekeh]. That is the highest praise I could afford any artist," she says.

For his part, Shodekeh continues creating opportunities to branch out and grow musically. He's recording an all-vocal CD later this year and planning a series of cross-cultural, multimedia events. "I'm inspired by moments where community is established," he says. "Like the TV show *Treme* that David Simon created. It shows that culture is what revitalized the [New Orleans] community after Katrina. I'm very much inspired by that, because culture isn't just the way we sing and dance. Culture is the way we dress, how we pray, make our meals—it encompasses every aspect of how we live our lives. Culture can be used to facilitate and strengthen community."

He's already produced one such event—which he calls Embody—where he shared the bill with a throat singer (a style that's often associated with Tuva, in southern Siberia) and an opera singer and, like at the BSO concert, got the audience singing along. "I want to genuinely and peacefully fuse with other musical traditions," he says, "and use those moments to connect people and really engage the audience. At that first Embody show, there were moments where we got the audience to emulate what we were doing, and it was so beautiful. It felt like church."

"I try to make it so that people actually forget that we're using our voices. I'm always interested in challenging other people's ideas about what music is, or isn't—or what musicianship can or can't be."

Shodekeh leans back in his chair. "I don't want what I do to be perceived as a cappella," he says. "I want to transcend that. I think we all aim for transcendence in our lives, so I think I'm on the right path." ■

JOHN LEWIS is Baltimore's arts & culture editor.

#### VISIT THE ARCHIVES

➔ [baltimoremagazine.net/archives](http://baltimoremagazine.net/archives)

**Pure Ethel, March 2011**

*Ethel Ennis, Baltimore's premier jazz singer.*

**The Kings of Dru Hill, May 2010**

*Catching up with the best-selling vocal group.*



Over 30 years experience. Every cake custom designed.

Voted Baltimore's best wedding cakes.

**Gravel's**  
M • A • R • K • E • T

Ruxton 410-823-6077 • Lutherville 410-308-2100 • Hereford 410-329-6221

**Friendly Farm RESTAURANT**

Serving Delicious Family Style Dinners for Over 50 Years

Gift Cards Available

Voted Baltimore's Best Crabcakes  
—Baltimore magazine 2009

**Friendly Farm RESTAURANT**

Open 7 days a week Noon to 8 P.M.  
17434 Foreston Rd, Upperco, MD 21155 • 410-239-7400 • [www.friendlyfarm.net](http://www.friendlyfarm.net)