

**HABIB YAZDI**Class of 2008
Boulder, CO

Habib Yazdi

This summer was pretty much the best summer ever. Thanks to the Burch Fellows Program, I was able to spend it drumming in Cape Coast, Ghana. The idea was to become familiar with Ghanaian culture and acquire some mad drumming skills. After arriving in Ghana, I found myself not only adopted as the tenth member of a Ghanaian family, but also as the most obviously unqualified member of Cape Coast's well-known drumming and dance group, Twerammon Traditionals.

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AFRICA

Ghana

LEARNING THE RHYTHMS OF THE FANTE IN GHANA

I arrived at my host family's door to be rushed, tackled and climbed by the three most loving children on the planet. Albert, Martin, and Sarah became my life outside of drumming. I quickly assumed my expected roles as playmate, tutor, chaperone, and arbiter, along with a multitude of others. My host mother, Martha Jonah, was too kind. She is the type person who raises six orphaned children and still makes time to come to my drum lessons just to see how I'm doing. Martha fed me delicious food and took me to the hospital when I ate food I had no business eating. When I think of all the times we huddled together to laugh at pictures, eat fufu, or watch the Ghana Black Stars work wonders at the World Cup – or the times we ran around the beach/public toilet, played soccer with a deflated basketball, or cranked up the volume for our marathon dance parties — I cannot help but feel like an idiot for being nervous and shy about living with my host family. One week with them and I went from being a timid foreigner to one completely outspoken, outgoing Obruni. Even if there had been no drumming, the amount of love and joy showered upon me by this wonderful Ghanaian family supplied me with enough personal growth to have made this my most worthwhile summer yet.

But, fortunately, there was drumming. Six days a week I would meet my masterful teacher, Odomankoma Pra, in the former armory — now housed with drums instead of guns — of the Cape Coast Slave Castle. This enormous, historical castle, where everyone's kindness makes it easy to forget the terrible dungeons within, was the scene of the many, many hours I spent learning incomprehensibly complex drum rhythms from all over Ghana. Each week began with a history lesson, depicting the background and purpose of the week's rhythms. Needless to say, the lesson became much more difficult as we moved on to the bell pattern, the backbone of the rhythm, and each role of the various supporting drums, the contributive and counteractive voices. By the time I

would get the hang of the leading drum, the commanding voice of all the drummers and dancers, I would instantly be humbled by the following week's series of even more complex rhythms.

Somewhere in between learning that "1" almost never comes at the beginning and how to play with a peeled branch, my teacher invited me to join his drumming and dance group, Twerammon. Rehearsals took place outdoors in the castle's former barracks. The first day, I felt the earth shake as the pounding of the Fom-Tom-From

drums commenced the rhythm that was once played only for high chiefs. Every weekend thereafter, we would board a tro-tro, or ride on top of the drums (scary even for Ghanaians), and go down bumpy, dirt roads to a faraway site where we would change into our traditional costumes and entertain chiefs and business executives. Being the only white person in the group, I was subject to much attention, especially when there were hundreds of school children. However, I would be so intensely focused on trying to play my part, a task made more difficult by the nine other counter-

rhythms and the one constantly slipping sheet covering my body, that I could barely smile

back without losing my concentration and the pattern altogether.

Funerals were the best shows. They involved

closing down roads for huge festivities held in the crowded back-alleys of Cape Coast under massive tents that sheltered us from the merciless African sun. The whole block, along with five others, would show up for three days and one night of non-stop music and dancing. My

teacher, who was the lead guitar player, would be signaling to an empty chair because the group members always forced me to abandon my seat at the sound-board and dance in front of hundreds of cheerful Ghanaians. Even the street vendors, with their wares skillfully balanced on their heads, would come out to shake

it like there was no tomorrow.

And that's how everyday felt in Ghana. Never before have I experienced such a non-stop, day-to-day way of living, that was so fulfilling, yet so simple. Everyday I'd come home from a long

day of drumming, ready to pass out, only to see three little bodies running barefoot down the dirt path ready to scramble all over me. This sudden brush with life would revive me long enough to last through teaching a computer lesson and washing my clothes by hand until I truly did pass out. Then, before I knew it, I was walking down the dirt road again, saying good morning to everyone, stopping to chat with the neighbor who always requested bring back bread, and starting the day all over again. But simplicity should not be mistaken for monotony — there was always something new and unexpected. It would be a simple matter, like bringing along the video camera only to find myself swarmed with people and suddenly filming a soccer match, or, showing up to a performance to be unexpectedly thrust into the role of a whip-bearing, white oppressor — the only one who actually looked the part — in a musical theater piece depicting the horrors of the slave trade, in the overwhelmingly befitting location of a former slave castle, in front of a hundred Ghanaians, on National Emancipation Day. Quite simply, Ghana gave me a whole new meaning to feeling alive — everyday, all the time, without any breaks from life or the desire to take one.

And so, Mr. Burch, for enabling me to experience the country of Ghana, become culturally immersed, pursue my passion for drumming, face new and exciting challenges on a daily basis, and make more friends than I can hardly up keep with, I am most sincerely grateful.

