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SHE'S GOT THE BEAT

Mill Valley's Barbara Borden uses drums to create community, heal

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Drumming pioneer Barbara Borden of Mill Valley in a scene from "Keeper of the Beat," a documentary by David L. Brown.

Drumming has taken Barbara Borden on a journey she never would have anticipated, which is joyously recounted in "Keeper of the Beat: A Woman's Journey into the Heart of Drumming," a documentary by filmmaker David L. Brown that airs on KQED this Sunday.

When the documentary premiered at the Mill Valley Film Festival last October both were surprised by the reaction. "The world premiere was the most raucous, enthusiastic, joyous crowd I've ever experienced in 40 years of filmmaking," says Brown, who met Borden at the Redwoods when he was filming a documentary on the Mill Valley retirement community's anti-war activists and she was leading a drumming circle. "She's more than just a nice, talented person; she's really quite an extraordinary subject for a documentary."

Although Borden has found success as a pioneering percussionist, it has not come without struggles and doubts. She was lucky that she had a loving family that was as crazy about music as she was. Her much older twin sisters sang on TV shows such as "I Love Lucy" and with entertainers such as Jimmy Durante as the Borden Sisters. But singing wasn't her thing; she wanted to drum. "There are no words, so all the energy is pure — pure anger, pure joy, whatever it is," says Borden, 68, who lives with her longtime partner Naomi Newman, co-founder of A Traveling Jewish Theatre, in Mill Valley. "Drums are called the instrument of truth because it's just this raw energy coming through. "

At age 10 she got her first drum kit. Her mother was nonplussed to place it smack in the middle of the living room. "I had so much support at home, there was just no question in my mind that drumming was what I had to do," she says. "I wanted to be a jazz musician. I love the potential, the spontaneity and the possibility of creating in the moment, and jazz held that."

By the time Borden came to San Francisco in 1965 at age 19, she had already established herself as a hotshot "girl drummer." She landed a regular gig in a club and believed she was on her way when the club suddenly shut down six weeks later. "That was shocking," she admits.



Barbara Borden (second from right) performs with Alive!, a San Francisco women's jazz group, in a scene from "Keeper of the Beat," a documentary by David L. Brown.

For the first time she began to seriously doubt whether her outside-the-box life as a musician was going to work. So she stopped drumming, married and got a job — the so-called American dream.

When the marriage ended less than three years later, Borden accepted that she wasn't cut out for that life. "I realized OK, I'm not going to try to be normal because that didn't work," she says.

She picked up her drumsticks again to perform with Alive!, a San Francisco women's jazz group that toured internationally and produced numerous CDs. Still, they constantly had to face the same question, "Why are you all women playing together?" — not a question the typical male jazz ensemble had to answer, she says.



A young Barbara Borden behind her drum kit.

After eight years, the band broke up and Borden felt as abandoned as she did when her father left the family when she was 8 years old without so much as a goodbye. Once again, doubts consumed her. But instead of giving up, Borden kept expanding her passion not only as a percussionist, but also as a teacher, healer and practitioner of "drumbeat diplomacy." It's a much different life than she envisioned. "I had that fame and fortune thing going on. Jazz probably wasn't the best route for that," she says with a laugh.

But about 10 years ago, Borden began to see herself in a new light. "I thought, OK, I'm not a drum healer, I'm just a healing force in the world. That's my intention," she says. "Even without a drum, I want the same thing



Barbara Borden in a scene from "Keeper of the Beat" in her high school swing band.

to be happening; I want to put out the kind of energy that's feel-good energy and not only for other people. It feels so much better inside me."

Her spirit, her joy, her determination to do more and be more, to create community wherever she goes is what Brown wanted to capture in his documentary. "Barbara represents a really inspiring role model. All the joy that can be found in life is kind of embodied in Barbara," he says. "The smile that you see on screen is real. It really reflects a joy she finds in life. I find that inspiring."

Borden says all she ever did was follow her heart; she hopes her story encourages others to do the same.



Barbara Borden in a scene from "Keeper of the Beat," a documentary by David L. Brown.