SYNCOPATION

Story by Rob Korobkin // Photography by Bryan Thomas

What does it take to bring a diverse group of people together? There are so many obstacles to overcome: most people aren't used to listening to strangers; they don't really want to listen to strangers; and when they do, they often end up feeling uncomfortable. But Michael Wingfield, a hand percussionist who lives in Portland, thinks it's possible to use the ancient art of drumming to help people overcome these obstacles. He's made it his job to bring communities together using nothing but the 14 weathered conga drums he carries in the back of his white 1990 Volvo station wagon.

In early April of this year, Wingfield drove up to Searsmont, Maine, a quiet little town near Belfast, to do a week-long workshop with students at the Ames Elementary School, one of the two schools in the area that he's been coming to since the late 1990s. Even though Wingfield only comes to Searsmont every other year, he has a knack for remembering names and seems to have friends everywhere he goes. "He becomes very much a part of the staff," says Principal Laura Miller. At the culminating show at the end of the week, Wingfield tries to find a volunteer in the audience who hasn't seen the show before, and it's almost impossible. Everybody's seen it, and most of them love it. "It just seems that there isn't any gap" said third-grade teacher Karen Craig-Foley, "from the time that he left and when he comes back."

Wingfield's level of acceptance in this town is no small feat. In the last few years, Craig-Foley and Miller say they have added more cultural diversity to the school's curriculum, making it one of the most progressive schools in the district. But it is still rural Maine, and Wingfield is an African-American who often wears the pair of brightly colored pants that a friend brought back for him from Senegal and a traditional African Kufi over his shaved head when he teaches. And Searsmont is a town that, as of the 2000 Census, had zero Black or African-American people living in it. But even though Wingfield is a black man, wearing African clothes, teaching a workshop on African and Afro-Caribbean music in an almost entirely white commu-

ABOVE >> MICHAEL WINGFIELD PUTS ON HIS TRADITIONAL AFRICAN "KUFI" AS HIS STUDENTS WATCH, WEARING KUFIS OF THEIR OWN.

PLAYING >> AFTER A WEEK-LONG RESIDENCY AT AMES ELEMENTARY SCHOOL, MICHAEL WINGFIELD PUTS ON A CONCERT WITH THE STUDENTS HE'S BEEN TEACHING.

nity, for the most part, his impact doesn't really have to do with race. To the kids, his workshop is just an exciting and fun thing to participate in; it's foreign but not at all threatening."Out here," says Principal Miller, "I don't think the kids actually recognize color."

While race may not be that big of an issue, Wingfield's style of teaching and the content of his classes are still very different from what normally happens in Searsmont. There can't be too many people like Wingfield in town who try to get a bunch of rowdy kids to figure out which century was the 15th by saying to them, "I need you to engage in this process of discovery." Wingfield is an old hippie, and it shows, but he's also a skilled teacher. He describes his teaching style as "part talk show host, part drill sergeant, part clown and part cheerleader." His goal, he says, is to keep each student engaged like the performer he once saw on Captain Kangaroo who could keep dozens of dinner plates spinning simultaneously, aware of each one's motion, and always there with a steadying hand or that extra push at exactly the right time.

At first glance, most of Wingfield's teaching looks like typical music instruction. He teaches the students how to hit the drums, demonstrating how the crease where their fingers meet their palms should connect with the edge of the drum before bouncing away. "It's almost like I'm pulling the sound out of the drum," he says. He teaches them some basic rhythms, including one that ends with a section that sounds like the theme to *The Adams Family*. But to Wingfield, drums are more than ways to make sounds. They are tools for uniting people. When he teaches people to play the drums, it is as much about teaching them how to get along with each other as it is about teaching them to play rhythms.

Wingfield believes that the ability to truly listen is not something that most people are born with, but is instead a rare skill that people have to learn. He hopes that his workshops will help people begin to "get a sense of how to listen, to the music, to the rhythm." Once people learn to hear the rhythms at the heart of the music, they can begin to learn not only how to play certain parts, but also how to work together in syncopation. "The music of the African Diaspora has distinct roles," explains Dylan Blanchard, a Portland percussionist who sometimes plays with Wingfield. Some roles are very simple while others involve playing complex harmonies, but "everybody knows and respects their role," says Blanchard, adding that it is the structure of these interlocking roles that "makes the music powerful and transformative." But in some American drum circles where people have little experience with traditional music, people don't play within the confines of particular roles or even really listen to each other. They just hit their drums as they want. "We call it buffalo beating," Wingfield says somewhat derisively.

Wingfield has spent the last four decades honing his playing style, and has come a long way since the day he first picked up a drum. Back then he was a renegade hip-

DANCING >> AS MICHAEL WINGFIELD LEADS THE CONCERT, A CONGA LINE FORMS BEHIND HIM.

pie sixteen-year-old finishing high school in Worcester, Massachusetts. The year was 1971, and the country was infected with "cosmic consciousness," remembers Wingfield. "It was coming through, through the arts, from the music," and Worcester was no exception. On sunny days, Elm Park, the so-called "Haight-Ashbury of Worcester," was full of young people playing hand drums and dancing. "People from the Black community, the Puerto Rican community, the White community, hippies in the hippie community," said Wingfield, "would get together and just drum." At first, Wingfield would come to the park to play basketball, but one day, a friend of let him borrow a drum so he could try banging out a beat with the other players. "Once I did," says Wingfield, "It put me on a journey."

Within a few years, Wingfield had become a disciple of Richie "Pablo" Landrum, a master hand percussionist who had learned his craft in the forties from helping out and drinking rum with the master African drummers in the Barnum & Bailey Circus in New York City. Landrum had gone on to hone his skills in Cuba and Ghana and was teaching at the Berklee College of Music in Boston. It was there that Wingfield studied with him, commuting over 40 miles each way from Worcester. "He taught more than just rhythms and technique," says Wingfield, "He taught the culture."

Since beginning his studies with Landrum, Wingfield has dedicated his life to sharing that drumming culture. He has taught throughout New England and performed with some of the world's leading acts, including prominent Brazilian jazz musician Airto Moreira and "intergalactic" jazz visionary, Sun Ra. One summer, when he was first getting going, he converted a beat up van into the "In-Sound-Out Mobile," filled it with drums and recruited some of his jazz musician friends to drive around Worcester with him, going everywhere from public parks to nursing homes to play music with people. Since moving to Portland in 1993, Wingfield has dedicated much of his time to teaching at schools.

On Friday night, Searsmont's parents come in to see their kids perform. The local doctor is there in a button-down collared shirt, near two guys in camo vests and tattered baseball caps who say they "cut wood and milk cows for a living." They sit on brown metal folding chairs as Wingfield conducts their children. For each piece, Wingfield recruits two parents from the audience to sit on either end of the row of performing children and play along with them. It's clear that the parents don't know how to listen to the rhythm and therefore can't figure out their parts. So they haphazardly

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pat at the drums, bobbing their heads to the well rehearsed rhythms of their children. The show is goofy at times. At one point, a parental volunteer is encouraged to move around embodying the sounds of the bee and the wind that the performers make. But "silliness is serious business," Wingfield explains later. "It relaxes them, especially when they're participating in something new that could be challenging. You know, it's like the spoonful of sugar."

The highlight of the show comes when everybody gets up and puts their hands on each other's shoulders, forms a line and dances around the gym to the tightly syncopated rhythms that Wingfield, the kids and a few of the more musical parents are playing together. It may not seem like much to have people hopping around a gymnasium, but Wingfield says that "music does a certain thing." Indeed, it's hard to imagine another situation in which people from across a town's economic spectrum would be so comfortable being silly with each other. And the fact that the beats remain stable and ordered, predictable even, as long as you're familiar with them, is a lot of what makes people feel safe enough to really get into it and come together. Back home after the long week, Wingfield is tired but proud. "I feel like I've done my job," he says with a grin.

PACKING UP >> MICHAEL WINGFIELD LOADS HIS DRUMS BACK INTO HIS VOLVO.