



# drum up

## ancestral sounds of **Don Juan**

Colombian Sound Shaman, **Juan Gabriel**, has worked with indigenous masters from all over the world, including Mayan priests, Amazonian healers, Tibetan masters and North American Lakotas. His unique offering is fusing these diverse traditions into a reverberating symphony of primal sounds. The result is akin to an extraordinary tribal opera in which the initiate is guided into a profound state of tranquility.

Juan first visited the UK 15 months ago and has been living in Bristol for the past five months, where he has already started to develop a cult following on the local mind, body, spirit scene.

**Will Gethin** explores his quixotic world of Sound.

I'm lying on my back on a sheepskin rug, I'm vibrating from head to foot. Drum beats are bouncing off the walls and pounding my body and being. Repetitive, thudding beats, trance-inducing, in chorus with the chanting of a tribal warrior.

I am at one of Juan Gabriel's sound healing sessions at the Relaxation Centre in Bristol. It's a Friday evening and my mind is spinning with thoughts from a stressful week's work. I resign myself to the unlikelihood of breaking any new ground during this session. But I am in for a surprise.

I first stumbled across Juan Gabriel at the Tribe of Doris, a drumming and multicultural music festival in Somerset. I was strolling across a field following a Cuban Dance workshop, when I encountered a swarthy little man with long wild hair, wheeling a giant suitcase through the rain towards me.

Half an hour later, perched upright on his magic carpet inside a yurt and surrounded by the contents of his now unpacked suitcase, Juan had transformed into a quintessential Colombian sound shaman. Garbed in black, a tunic and loose trousers, an array of Tibetan singing bowls, bells



and conches were sprawled out before him, while a collection of rattles, aboriginal drums, a didgeridoo and an assortment of indigenous instruments, lay on the carpet around and behind him.

'Juan is unique, your body has never heard or felt anything like it,' said Deasy Bamford, organiser of Tribe of Doris, who invited Juan to perform the opening ceremony at the festival. 'I have no idea how he does it but he takes you to another world and then brings you back again.'

I left the yurt an hour later feeling blissful and invigorated. And eager to know more about this mysterious sound shaman and his curious collection of instruments.

At the Relaxation Centre, the drumming gradually subsides and I'm bathing in the sounds of an ocean as a monk sings holy incantations.

Church bells are peeling. A deep-throat-extraterrestrial growl conjures up a song of haunting beauty.

An exotic bird – red-green-yellow – hovers, silently fluttering above me, and then drops to the floor beside me.

Altered states of consciousness such as this fleeting experience of lucid dreaming are not uncommon at Juan Gabriel's sound sessions. A sound journey works like a deep meditation, a fast and effective way of accessing the inner silence which habitually evades most of us in our everyday lives, concealed beyond the chattering mind.

'When you are in silence, the idea of yourself dissolves,' Juan began to explain when I visited him at his Bristol home, a few weeks after the Tribe of Doris.

Perched upright on a meditation cushion like the hybrid of a Tibetan lama and Castanada's Don Juan, a gold Buddha statute rose out of the fireplace behind him, like a phoenix rising from the ashes.

'When you get rid of those mind concepts anything can come as the potential for spirit to manifest,' he resumed animated. 'In a session you can be taken to the peak of the mountain or the bottom of the sea and connect with animals, people and spirits. Everything has the potential to happen. But if you are relating with the person Juan as creator of the sound or with this room as a confined space, then you are blocking and limiting the experience.'

A wise sage – at just 28 – Juan is old beyond his years, yet he bears a gentle, childlike countenance, an essence of purity.

Sound healing works on many levels, such as physical, energetic, emotional, and spiritual. On a physical level, the vibration of the sounds gives your body a micro-massage and on a mental level, it leads you into a guided meditation without your knowing or having the intention. It's the state between sleep and the waking consciousness, where you can see and hear what you can't normally experience.

'When you come to a session you have this bubble of space, of time, in which you don't have to react to the distractions of the outside world,' Juan explained.

'Usually we have to respond to this information – we go to the supermarket or to the movies – we rush to work or go dancing – we are reacting and responding and we don't have time to be with ourselves and to listen to our hearts and our inner wisdom.'

'So in a session, you use the space to look within and not to react, so the sound is like a kind of meditation but also like a mattress which holds you and embraces you, allowing this nurtured space of awareness.'

Brain activity is also reduced during a session, which in turn causes an emotional change because you don't have to react and continue working with your habitual patterns. You can stop and take a moment to look inside, and in this way your energetic body is being harmonised.

Born in Bogota, Colombia, Juan was raised in a spiritual environment. His father and grandfather together ran a well-known spiritual centre, Centro San Juan Bautista.

While attributing his spiritual nature to his father's lineage, his musical flair comes from his mother's side of the family. His grandmother was a famous opera singer and as a child he would attend rehearsals and watch her sing, so from an early age he was tuning in to the power of her voice.

Juan went on to study a wide range of voice techniques starting with Classical and he learned a variety of instruments, including the flute, piano and guitar.

After leaving a school, he met a Mayan priest, who was the catalyst to his taking a conscious spiritual path.

'I learnt about the Mayan calendar, about the cycles of the moon and the seasons, of life, rhythm, waves and vibrations,' he recalls. And assisted by Mayan fires, he explored the different aspects of his being. Bogota has

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become a hotbed of New Age activity and over the next few years, Juan explored a wide variety of traditions. He connected with the North American Lakotas and with Amazonian healers, who shared their wisdom, healings and instruments. But the tradition he felt most empathy with was Tibetan Buddhism, which he studied in depth, both in Bogota and Dharamsala, India.

He taught himself throat singing by listening to Tibetan monks, but one senses he has teachers on other levels.

‘The Tibetans learnt it through deep meditation,’ he told me, ‘from deities like Yamantaka and Mahakala and the idea is to give offerings to these deities, to call protectors and guides and to develop spiritual practice.’

Having conquered the throat singing, Juan started to pick up Mongolian overtone by listening to masters from Tuva. He then mastered the technique in London with Jill Purce, the UK’s leading Sound Healer, who he has worked regularly with since he came to England.

One of his most important teachers is a renowned Dutch shaman, Jan van der Stappen, who helped him access inner wisdom through drumming and sound.

‘Drumming grounds you and connects you to the earth so you can commune with spirit,’ Juan said. ‘It’s the awakening of knowledge in ourselves of our DNA.’

We have all the information and wisdom in us from the first human being till now, so we don’t need to look outside ourselves for answers.’

But it took one more teacher, a Buddhist monk from Argentina, to finally drive this message home.

‘He was this really wrathful manifestation of wisdom. He was the one who put the mirror in front of my face and said, “who are you?”’

Juan has taken his sound healing therapy to schools, colleges, yoga and meditation centres where he has helped patients suffering from cancer, HIV, addictions and learning difficulties.

Sometimes miracles happen. As with Mary-Christine Dowdeswell, a French lawyer from Wimbledon, who has undergone several private sound sessions with Juan. Mary-Christine had been pronounced 70 per cent deaf by a top specialist in France.



‘The sound healing has gradually unblocked my ear,’ she marvelled. ‘I can now hear well again in my right ear.’ And she even learnt to sing:

‘I normally can’t even whistle but during the session, I discovered a voice I never knew existed. If you are absolutely trusting and I trust Juan Gabriel, then you enter a safe sacred space where wonders start to happen. If you tap into pure energy, it unblocks the sounds within you that needs to come out. I can produce the sounds, I answer back, I become the instrument. I become powerful.’

‘Inner attitude is the key to healing,’ Juan assured me. ‘Being willing to be happy rather than suffer pain and afflictive emotions.’

As the sound session at the Relaxation Centre draws to a close, we gather before Juan on his magic carpet.

‘I have felt some heavy energies around my eyes for some time,’ announces Justine, who is attending her first sound session. ‘My eyes don’t feel heavy anymore.’ She wipes a tear from her eye. ‘I felt a sense of cosmic consciousness as though my physical

form was melting away,’ says Amanda, a Waldorf Steiner teacher who regularly attends Juan’s sound sessions. ‘I felt as if I had become spirit.’

‘Try to take a note of what you might have experienced in the session,’ says Juan’s soft voice of calm. ‘Be aware of any images, thoughts, memories, any problems that come, any colours or sounds.’

‘Maybe you don’t think it makes sense or perhaps you felt like you were all the time in your mind, in your emotions or your thoughts. Do not let them pass.’

Take note of your dreams. Because this process is continuing.’ **ks**

## more information

- Juan regularly hosts sound journeys and workshops in Bristol (Lam Rim Buddhist Centre, Relaxation Centre and Pierian Centre), Cheltenham (Isbourne Foundation) and London (Tabernacle, Powis Square W11).
- To order a copy of Juan Gabriel’s ‘Elemental’ CD and for further information about his sound sessions and workshops, please visit his website: [www.ancestralsounds.org](http://www.ancestralsounds.org) or contact him on 0117 908 6789 / 0774 6067194.