

# PERCUSSION

From page 1

Hirano is one of the top percussionists in the touring and recording circuit. Based in Los Angeles, he's toured with performers such as Fleetwood Mac, Stevie Nicks, Lionel Richie, Isaac Hayes, Bette Midler, Stevie Wonder, LeAnn Rimes, Sean "Diddy" Combs, Mary J. Blige, Patti LaBelle, Barry Manilow, Kenny Loggins, Chaka Kahn, Don Henley, the Neville Brothers. He's also recorded with artists such as Fleetwood Mac, Dr. Dre, Whitney Houston, The Temptations, Nelly Furtado and Jay-Z.

On Saturday, Sept. 6, he's a featured artist at the Percussion Summit 2008 at the Naples Philharmonic Center for the Arts.

It's taken him four years, but he's finally coming to Southwest Florida to perform.

He was scheduled four years ago, but the event was cancelled, due to Hurricane Frances.

"That was a crazy time," he says. He'd just finished a tour with Fleetwood Mac, but then learned he had to perform some make-up dates with the band. He was to play in Pennsylvania, then two nights later, in New York. The Percussion Summit date was smack in the middle.

The band arranged for him to be taken by limo to the airport immediately after the Pennsylvania concert, and flown by Lear jet to Naples for his concert obligation at the Phil.

Even the flight crew was nervous about Hurricane Frances, he says. The Percussion Summit was cancelled one hour before Hirano was scheduled to step on the plane.

Hirano was then scheduled to perform the following year, but couldn't, because Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans, where his wife is from.

"I really, truly am coming down this time, God willing," Hirano says.

He's on break from playing percussion for Bette Midler at Caesar's Palace in Las Vegas. The show opened in February, but rehearsals started last fall, he says. Midler's concerts rotate with two other performers: Cher and Elton John. So Hirano will typically have four weeks on, then two months off.

"The great thing for me is that I can do events like the Percussion Summit, where I know a year in advance that I have free time for allotted windows of time, that I can actually book myself. I've been doing a lot of projects as a producer, projects for recording sessions, and doing a lot of percussion summits around the country as well."

He's toured with Midler before, playing on the U.S. and Australia legs of her Kiss My Brass tour.

As for the current Las Vegas show, "It's a huge, huge production," he says. "We have 18 dancers, plus her three girls, plus the band, plus the horn section. So when everyone's on stage, it's about 31 people."

Though she has a script she uses as a framework, Midler ad libs a lot.

"Someone of her caliber in entertainment, she vamps all the time," Hirano says. "So we definitely crack up, when she cracks a joke that's definitely off-script, or she's reacting to some things that are going on, either on the stage or in the audience. Definitely a lot of fun."

Because of his broad training and his versatility, Hirano is able to play a wide variety of genres: pop, rock, hip-hop, rap, jazz, Latin, world music and even classical.

There's a huge difference from genre to genre, he says. "First of all, you have to be familiar with each genre: what to play, what kind of goes along with the sensibilities of each style of music. Also, unlike any other instrument, percussion is pretty unlimited as to what instruments you play, so you have to understand each genre of music to the point where the instrument choice is very important."

For example, with Fleetwood Mac, on a rocking song, he might play the cowbell, or tambourines. But those instruments wouldn't be appropriate when backing LeAnn Rimes on a country ballad.



COURTESY PHOTO

Percussionist Taku Hirano in a drum circle. Hirano headlines Percussion Summit 2008 at the Naples Philharmonic this Saturday.



COURTESY PHOTO

Taku Hirano toured with Stevie Nicks.

"So it's all about having the sensibilities, and really enjoying and listening to, and studying just all genres of music and all artists," he says. "I really enjoy what I do, because with percussion I'm able to play a wide range of instruments. And I've tracked my career in such a way that I get the opportunity to play a bunch of different styles of music, because I love all styles of music. So I've really made an effort to chart my course in that way as well."

Hirano, who was born in Japan then raised in Fresno, Calif., started studying a different percussion instrument — the piano — when he was 7, before switching to drums at age 9. He credits public education — studying band in school — and the encouragement and support of his parents with nurturing his love of percussion. He also had private lessons and studied with the principal timpanist of the Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra. He received his bachelor of music degree from the Berklee College of Music as one of the first hand percussion principals.

Hirano studied the percussion styles of Cuba, Brazil, West Africa, the Middle East and India, studying with master percussionists from Cuba, India and Ghana.

After four years of delays, he's looking for-

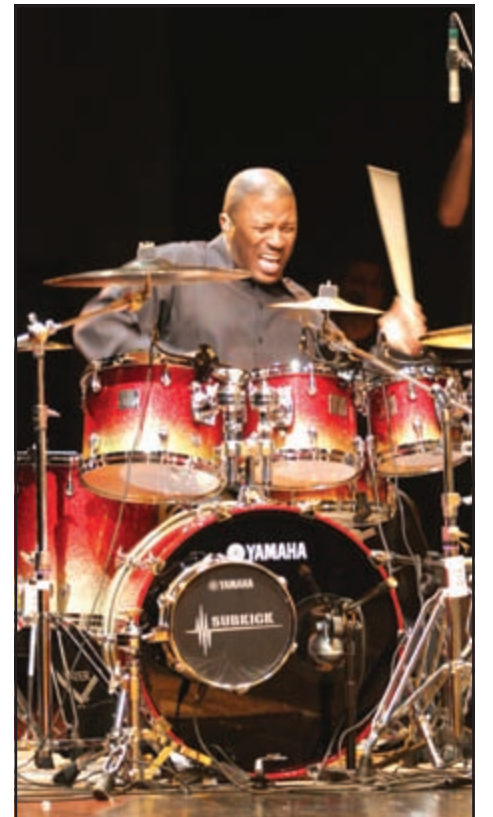
ward to playing at Percussion Summit 2008 at the Phil.

"I haven't participated in anything like this in terms of a kind of locally-based event," he says. "I'm going to be a featured guest performer at the Percussion Arts Society International Convention this fall, in Austin, Tex., but as far as what's doing in Naples, it's very, very unique that they're able to do it. It's quite impressive. It is a really great thing that they're bringing percussion to the local community and exposing people to that."

"They were looking for a second artist to be a featured performer, so I was able to recommend my friend, Gorden Campbell. So he's going to be another featured performer. He's a drum set performer who's played with the likes of Beyonce, Earth, Wind and Fire. He's actually on tour right now with Jessica Simpson. We're going to have a chance to play together, which we haven't done in a long time."

The two are also giving percussion clinics Saturday afternoon, prior to the concert, from 3 to 6 p.m. (Tickets are \$18 for adults and \$12 for students.)

The Percussion Summit, a unique concert in which only percussion instruments are played, also features percussionists from the



COURTESY PHOTO

Gorden Campbell.

if you go

>> **What:** Percussion Summit 2008  
 >> **When:** 8 p.m. Saturday, Sept. 6  
 >> **Where:** Naples Philharmonic Center for the Arts, 5833 Pelican Bay Blvd., Naples  
 >> **Cost:** \$28 for adults, \$15 for children  
 >> **Information:** Call (239) 597-1900 or go to [www.thephil.org](http://www.thephil.org). Note: A special percussion clinic will be held earlier that afternoon from 3-6 p.m.; cost is \$18 for adults and \$12 for students.

Naples Philharmonic Orchestra, the Florida Orchestra and the Jacksonville Symphony.

"There's a certain degree of a child, or somebody, watching a drum being hit and having a connection and saying, 'Hey, I could do that,'" Hirano says. "But at the time, seeing somebody do it very well, at a virtuosic level, is also very impressive. It's twofold, how it draws people in, moreso than other instruments."

"I think percussion is the second-oldest instrument on earth, so it really hits people on a gut level. It's very primal." ■