

interview by
Heather Mount



Susie Ibarra: Rythym, Work, and Inspiration

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"I really like learning something...that's the way life is, each day you can learn something new..."

--Susie Ibarra

The quartet rumbled, swirled, and grew into a fantastic roar of music and personalities feverishly working together, but my eyes remained glued to the percussionist. She was Susie Ibarra; drummer, percussionist, and fount of endless enthusiasm and love for music, a performer whose fluid grace casts an instant spell on any audience. Using a drum kit tailored to her every move, and adding in a host of percussive instruments—including shells, assorted metals, and pieces of wood and bells—Ibarra carefully selects the perfect touch for every musical passage. On stage with others or solo, Ibarra emanates a spirituality, a rich story, a tale of an unshackled optimism conveyed by hands, body, and mind. Susie Ibarra is first and foremost an obsessive learner. She has the ability to interject the playful, the exploratory, the daring and the limitless into her art and into her life.

Susie Ibarra was born in California and grew up in Texas before moving to New York. A young stalwart in the ever-burgeoning downtown NY jazz and improv music scenes, Susie Ibarra has played and recorded impressive works with the likes of William Parker, David S Ware, Matthew Shipp, and Butch Morris. Susie now works and records with her husband, Assif Tsahar, [the bold young saxophonist.] The two find enrichment from the transcendental interplay of the personal and the musical in this duo format.

The occasion of this interview coordinates with the performance series curated by Susie Ibarra in April of '99 at the performing spaceTonic, the latest haven of the avant-garde in Manhattan's Lower East Side. Susie has put together a whole month of music by ensembles with female leaders. In talking to Susie Ibarra, her open-minded attitude towards learning is evident—she asked me as many questions about myself as I asked her!

H: How did you get started playing drums?

S: I didn't actually start playing drums until high school. I started playing classical piano when I was five and later sang in choirs and also played in church. I started drums when I was about sixteen - I went to a local rock concert and said to myself, 'that looks like a lot of fun'. I was studying art, and then I went one night to New York to see the Sun Ra Arkestra at Sweet Basil- I totally fell in love with jazz after this. After one year of play-

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ing, I knew I seriously wanted to do it. I started playing in Asian drumming groups like the Phillipine Kulintang, Javanese and Balinese gamelan, and Afro-Cuban and West African groups... I actually just recently got tympanis and vibes, and I have a lot more to work on!"

H: Sounds like fun! How about after high school?

S: Well, after high school I went to Sarah Lawrence for one year and then left to play music. I next attended Mannes College of Music and then went to Goddard College where I got my diploma in music.

H: Did you have teachers that you worked with, or whose work you admired, or...

S: Oh yes, I've had a lot of great teachers- Vernal Fournier, Milford Graves...who was probably my most influential teacher. I studied with Milford Graves for several years. His whole approach to the kit is about employing hand-drumming ...he was very profound. He teaches acupuncture, martial arts and knows a lot about herbals. When I studied martial arts with him, I was really out of shape at the time, and he really kicked my butt! And I studied Phillipine Kulintang with Danny Kalanduyan.

H: Do you think you learned more from your teachers directly, or from playing with others?

S: I think there is a balance you have to reach...it's up to the individual, but for me it's a balance. I don't know if you know Denis Charles, but I learned a lot from him. He was a great drummer who passed away last year, and I used to play duos with him for the last two years of his life. I got a lot of music from him. He played with Cecil Taylor, Steve Lacy, since the 60's...My husband and I have played together a long time, and now we are a huge part of each other's growth. For example, I have started to collect things for percussion when we travel- this was Assif's suggestion, and it really opened me up and became part of my sound.

H: It's a lucky and a very beautiful thing to be able to play music with your partner. I find that when you know each other so well, when things are on they are so on but when they are off, they are really painful...

S: Yes, that's true. But in general we feel very lucky. I feel lucky all the time, that I can enjoy playing music with people. Playing music with my husband is very special- Musically it's very intuitive and very effortless..we've developed it over the years- we're never off! I know where he's going all the time and he knows where I am going....even if we change quickly, we are right there...

H: Sorry to sidetrack, we were talking about musicians you've played with and teachers...

S: Yes...I really like working with drummers, I really like drummers and I get along with them well. I like learning something new from every one of them- that's the way life is, each day you can learn something new. I am

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always looking for a balance. Well...I was playing with Butch Morris' orchestra, and he steered me to the tympani. Actually, he gave me two tympani s!

H: Which brings up a question and...oh dear, I know how awkward it is to describe your own stuff but...how would you describe your music and your future musical directions?

S: People have tried to, and keep trying! In previous eras people have called this avant-garde or avant jazz. What I do is new, but it involves a lot of improv...it comes out of jazz and out of a lot of kinds of music. I am reading Duke Ellington's autobiography and he simplifies it really well:

"There's good music and there's bad music; a lot depends on the listener..." I still haven't finished it, but it's a great book! I don't mind what they call it as long as they listen to it.

H: And being a woman in the avant-garde, downtown, arguably "male" world of music where your career is constantly being made, would you say there are big differences because you are a woman?

S: There is a DEFINITE difference between being a man and a woman in these circuits, and I'd be pulling your leg if I said no, I sure would!!!

H: (both of us giggle!) What kinds of differences?

S: I've talked to girlfriends who work in other genres, and it seems that in art, in literature, architecture, sculpture, it's gone past feminism to post-feminism. Well in music, feminism never really even hit! The majority of musicians I play with are male, and that says it right there. I might be one of the few women at any festival. You can't wait around for others to "do it"! Society likes to tell us "these are things men do and these are things women do, and it's not necessarily true...too often people separate masculine and feminine qualities when really these are masculine and feminine qualities in everything.

S: There are so many strong women out there who have created great works. When I was growing up, I didn't have a woman role model as a drummer but I had strong women role models in my life like my mother. I have never thought of myself as a very political person. It can be hard to be a musician period, and hard to be a minority...society putting labels on it. The beautiful thing about music is that it transcends race, gender, or age...it's beyond that. In society you might face these things. It's important to keep going, and to keep up hope.

H: How about touring?

S: Touring can be like a love-hate experience, but it is a beautiful experience and a great experience to go around the world to different places to get the opportunity to play great music.

H: Do you play more in the States or in Europe?

S: Well the States are opening up more now. In the past, many jazz musi-

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cians had to tour Europe to make a living. There are so many incredible people in small towns...The media likes to say "this is jazz", "this is swing" whatever, but there are so many people who play in many bands and who love the music and who have never heard it before. We could be playing to a rock audience, or to people in another generation, but...music is a language that cuts through other languages. Overall, I feel blessed that in touring with William Parker's group, "In Order to Survive", and Matthew Shipp (Trio), with David S Ware, and with Assif, I have had really positive experiences. I have been fortunate on tour.

H: I am sure everybody asks you this now, but...why did you leave the David S Ware Quartet?

S: I left to work on my own projects. It was time. David gave me a lot, and I am really grateful for everything. So many beautiful moments in music.

H: What's coming up for you, and what's next?

S: I just did a Carnegie Hall show with Paulina Oliveros, and I will play soon with Little Huey (William Parker's group) in Paris. I have curated this month (April) at Tonic, and...I am working on lots of my own music. Right now I am writing different combinations, and sometimes it takes a while to find the right people to play with. I started a trio with Cooper-Moore on piano, and Charles Burnham on violin.

H: What would you say, Susie, to other aspiring female drummers out there?

S: Practice practice practice! Listen a lot. Like I said, have faith and don't give up hope. When mistakes get made just keep on going. One person can cry blues whilst someone else is too- the important thing is to keep going.



photo by David Mellens