

A Legacy of Brazilian Percussion with Mestre Jorge Alabê

By Carl Dixon

The PASIC50 Daytime Showcase Concert features internationally recognized Mestre Jorge Alabê in a program of Brazilian musical traditions never before performed at PASIC. The concert will showcase Jorge's authoritative mastery of Candomblé, samba de roda, pagode, and samba enredo, illustrating the history, evolution, and musical connections of these Afro-diasporic artforms.

Supporting Jorge is a lineup of dozens of percussionists from across the country who have studied with Jorge and continue to pass down his knowledge to new generations. The professional drummers, dancers, singers, and cavaquinho players participating owe much of their training and understanding of the culture to Jorge, and their presence in the concert offers a more complete picture of traditional culture, framing the drumming rhythms with song, dance, and the cultural context in which these traditions developed. This all-star lineup will be directed by Carl Dixon, who has directed shows with Jorge Alabê at festivals and concerts across the country.

CANDOMBLÉ

Afro-Brazilian Candomblé is a living religion derived from the varied fragments of West and Central African reli-

gion and culture as it was reconstructed in Bahia, Brazil during the trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and colonial era spanning the 16th–19th centuries. Passed across generations of practitioners, percussionists, dancers, and storytellers, it carries the histories of African people through song, rhythm, and dance.

Although the rhythms have been appropriated across the musical traditions of Brazil, Candomblé is at its core a religious tradition, sharing energy, spirituality, and

life to those who practice. The rhythms act as anchors to recognize and tell the stories of the deities that guide practitioners.

Candomblé is organized around Olodumaré, the supreme being and manifestation of the universe and everything in it. An indecipherable being, Olodumaré can only be reached through the mediating deities known as Orixás. In ceremony, the Orixás are called upon and honored as a way to acknowledge Olodumaré and the



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Mestre Jorge Alabê

vast connections that exist beyond individual perceptions.

Candomblé liturgy uses call-and-response song form that can be traced to the musics of the Fon, Yoruba, and Bantu in West and Central Africa. The characteristic percussion calls, patterns, and improvisations are focused on the songs that salute the orixás.

The rhythms are played by a percussion battery, including a double bell (gan, or agogo) and a set of three drums. The repeating rhythm patterns played on the gan create the foundational timeline around which the drumming patterns and songs are organized. The three drums that comprise the Candomblé percussion battery are collectively called *atabaques*. The three sizes of the drums correspond to their relative pitch. From high to low they are named *lê*, *rumpi*, and *rum* (pronounced “whom”).

The *lê* and *rumpi* are typically played with two sticks called *aguidavi*, made from branches of the guava tree. These drums perform a supporting role in the music, often doubling each other in a rhythm that embellishes the basic gan pattern. The *rum* is the lead drum in the ensemble and is typically played with one hand and one stick, although some rhythms are played without sticks. The sonic vocabulary is much larger, and the technical level is much more demanding on the *rum* because of the combinations possible between the stick and the hand (Miller, 2025).

While each musician in Candomblé has a role in the traditional call-and-response, “Ogan Alabê is a high title bestowed on the performers of ritual singing and drumming who have demonstrated their mastery of the liturgy” (Miller, 2025). The Alabê leads all of the singing and drumming during a ceremony and acts as an intermediary between the *iawo* or congregation and the Orixás.

JORGE ALABÊ

Jorge Bezerra Alabê was born in Rio de Janeiro and was selected at ten years old to begin a musical apprenticeship into

Candomblé, joining a lineage with direct roots to *Casa Branca*, the first and most important Candomblé house. In addition to this position of high honor, Jorge has performed all over the world. He was a lead singer with the Filhos de Gandhi in Rio de Janeiro and later became the rhythm director (*mestre de bateria*) of the Minas Gerais Samba School in Belo Horizonte. He recorded with such Brazilian music stars as Milton Nascimento and Mirtinho da Vila and made regular appearances on the Globo TV program *Brasil Pandeiro* from 1978–80. In 1984, Jorge became the percussion director of the internationally touring Brazilian performing group, Oba Oba. Over a 15-year span, the group toured through Europe, Asia, South America, and the United States, playing some of the most renowned theaters in the world.

Since 1996, Jorge has lived in the United States, conducting samba groups and teaching workshops on Brazilian music and dance at universities and community organizations throughout the country. Currently based in Oakland, California, he has taught many in the U.S. who specialize in Brazilian percussion.

CONCERT

The PASIC50 concert will open with Candomblé drumming, song, and dance in a salute to the Orixás. Jorge will lead a chorus in song while simultaneously playing the *rum*, the lead drum of the trio of *atabaques*. Rhythms and songs dedicated to several different orixá will be presented, including songs from Jorge’s landmark recording *Cantigas e Ritmos dos Orixás: The Music of Candomblé*. Special guest dancers will perform traditional movements honoring the orixá, showing the direct connection and communication of the rhythms, calls, and improvisations of the drums to the dance movements.

The concert will move into a *roda de samba* (samba circle), starting with the rhythm *samba de roda* and flowing into the popular music style of *pagode*. This highly improvisational and communicative backyard party music is played on

a unique set of percussion instruments including the pandeiro, surdo, tantan, tamborim, reco-reco, and cavaquinho. Drawing on samba rhythms heard during Carnival, these songs are meant to inspire a sense of joy and inclusivity.

The finale features a thunderous *bateria* (percussion section of a samba school) playing all aspects of music present in a samba school Carnival parade. The *esquenta*, commonly performed at the beginning of a show or parade, features Jorge’s unmatched skill and creativity improvising on the *repique* (*repenique*) and warming up the *bateria* in preparation for the finale. The *bateria* medley will include rhythms from several prominent samba schools in Rio and will be accompanied by a samba dance show demonstrating the connection between rhythms of the drums and the traditional movements that have evolved from Candomblé and *roda de samba* into the Rio style dance known worldwide. The program will culminate in *samba enredo*, the form of song performed in Carnival parades, with the tremendous energy of the combined forces.

Special thanks to Andy Miller whose forthcoming book, *Cantigas e Ritmos dos Orixás: The Language of Drumming in Afro-Brazilian Candomblé Ketu* (available at PASIC), details the life and music of Jorge Alabê and his contributions to the Candomblé traditions.

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