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POP CULTURE

LEAF delivers that `festival moment'

Drum circle, poetry slam stood out at Black Mountain event
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BLACK MOUNTAIN - The drumming grew louder as I stumbled up the dark path, tripping over tree roots and rocks. I entered a clearing.

On my left, a girl twirled a neon necklace. In front of me, flames licked logs, sending red embers into the starry sky. A dozen or so people sat around the bonfire beating drums. Others did interpretative dances -- flailing their arms or doing that stutter-step move like the kid from "A Charlie Brown Christmas Special."

I had expected wild dancing in the drum circle at the Lake Eden Arts Festival in Black Mountain, about two hours west of Charlotte. Any festival with drumming, music, yoga and poetry is bound to have those twirly dancers doing the Deadhead wiggle.

I didn't expect Kevin Meyame -- a wiry, dreadlocked drummer who grabbed my attention. Meyame, of Africa's Ivory Coast, couldn't have weighed more than 160 pounds, but his energy filled the circle. Others were beating the skins with a soul-lite vibe as if they were thinking, "drumming is cool, so look passionate." Meyame drummed with the ferociousness of Kobe Bryant driving to the hoop.

Smiling, Meyame stalked the fire, pounding furiously. Then he'd stop, throw his hands in the air, toss his head triumphantly and watch people dance to echoes of the rhythm he'd unleashed.

It was well after midnight and cold enough to see your breath on top of that mountain, but Meyame wore only a white tank top and khakis. Sweat poured from him.

Watching him play was one of those special festival moments. I've attended numerous festivals, and I rarely have them. I had one at my first black gay pride festival at Howard University's Banneker Field in 1990, and another in 2000, shivering around a fire at a MerleFest campground with the Phisbins -- a Pennsylvania collective of brothers and friends. To those, I'll add the drum circle at the Lake Eden Arts Festival, known as LEAF. The festival is held in the spring and fall.

Last weekend I attended my first LEAF after hearing Charlotte poet Terry Creech rave to me early this summer about the festival's previous poetry slams. He also loved seeing the sun set on the lake at Camp Rockmont, where LEAF is nestled.

When I arrived Friday, there was so much I wanted to do that I forgot to stop, breathe and watch the sunset. I nearly tore a hole in my schedule, checking and then scratching out activities: introduction to palmistry or the band Magic of African Rhythms; Thomas Mapfumo or the opening round of the poetry slam; the Golden Trumpets Gospel or breakfast.

Finally, I put the schedule away and decided to plan my weekend one footstep at a time.

Saturday, my feet led me to a group of people doing the Brazilian martial art of capoeira in a grassy field. I also saw the band Afro-Blu, featuring bluesman Corey Harris. I finished the afternoon at

the poetry tent, where Charlotte's Bluz, Mekkah, B.G. and Maze Forever advanced to the final rounds.

That evening, as I wandered to the slam finals, I got sidetracked by a woman spinning flaming balls on the lake's tiny beach. She tumbled and spun in the sand. It was tough leaving the fire show, but I didn't want to miss the slam.

The finals came down to Sonya Renee and Chris August, both of Washington, and Nam of Lexington, Ky.

Nam was good, but his delivery reminded me too much of the narrator from Dr. Suess TV shows. August delivered a quietly powerful poem about the pain of growing up gay, but he had to follow Renee's thunderous pro-choice piece. Nearly everyone in the audience was stomping and clapping when she finished. August couldn't compete with that.

I didn't think anything else LEAF had to offer could compare to the emotional high of the slam, so I headed to my tent about midnight. Cutting through campsites, I spied a giant teepee looming from a hilltop.

My feet led me there.

Sitting in front of a campfire, Eileen Ford of Atlanta stuck a fiery prong in her mouth. In a grassy area a few feet away, a man named Elonious, from Asheville, spun a flaming baton about his body.

I watched, knowing my feet had led me to another moment.

Want to go next year? May 13-15, Oct. 14-16.

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