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## Keijser a talented, inspirational performer

Dancers, musicians mourn loss of Samba Nova drummer  
By STEPHEN PEDERSEN Arts Reporter

The Halifax music and dance community is reeling with shock at the sudden death on Saturday of much-loved drummer and inspiring musical spirit Matthieu Keijser.

Keijser, 53, was a big influence on the Halifax music scene as a teacher of African and Brazilian drumming, dancers' accompanist and founder of Salsa Picante and Samba Nova.

"He was integral to the band from the beginning, a knowledgeable voice," says Salsa Picante co-founder Danny Martin.

"It was through him I realized I knew nothing about salsa."

When Keijser, who was born in Holland, came to Halifax from New York in the late '80s, where he was playing with the Drummer's Collective and studying with Frank Matabe, Halifax Dance immediately snapped him up.

"He was one of our key accompanists ever since 1989," said Halifax Dance artistic administrator Tim Keenan Wednesday. "He accompanied both ballet and modern dance on drums, percussion and piano, in both our professional and recreational programs.

"Matthieu was brilliantly talented, an amazing improviser who could pick up any instrument and play it. He inspired so many people. He had the gift of firing them up. We're devastated."

Keijser's generosity of spirit was also felt at JazzEast. "He gave so much to the community for little material return," artistic director Susan Hunter said.

Keijser's troupe of community drummers, Samba Nova, was an integral part of the Atlantic Jazz Festival ever since they moved out doors. Traditionally the group would march down to the mainstage tent on Spring Garden Road from Victoria Park on South Park Street. The annual kickoff to the festival turned in to a full-blown parade with huge puppets, bands, clowns and individual musicians, reaching a peak in the 2005 parade.

"The parade was all Matthieu's doing," Hunter said. "He produced it, it was all his vision, his long-term vision for it. I don't know that we would be able to do it without him."

Matthieu was a superb educator who went into schools under the one-time Arts Infusion program (now called Arts Smarts) and fired up kids with his musical enthusiasm.

Anne Muecke, a 10-year veteran of Samba Nova, which invited anyone from the community to play percussion instruments regardless of experience, said, "Matthieu was really the spirit of Samba Nova. He understood it, understood what the sound was supposed to be like, created the feel of it for us.

"He brought such fun to it — he was so funny. Every Saturday on the waterfront we would play. It became a fun community experience, people of all ages with different backgrounds playing and having fun together. We responded to the child in Matthieu. In a sense, it was empowering, kind of crazy with a sense of liberation. We need a leader, but it will be impossible to replace him."

Keijser, who had an operation for a brain tumour nine years ago, is known to have suffered severe, sometimes excruciating pain from a herniated disc and chronic insomnia. "He played with us rain or shine, it didn't matter how much pain he was in — terrible pain for so long. Yet he always kept a brave face," said Salsa Picante's Martin.

Keijser's death occurred just two weeks before Drumfest. His annual concert of drumming is to take place Nov. 4. Participants say the concert in St. Matthew's United Church will be given in tribute to his memory. His 17-year-old son Jonathan will take over the production.

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Keijser is survived by his wife Joann, Jonathan and 13-year-old daughter Zoe. A memorial service will be held in St. Matthew's United Church at 2 p.m. Sunday, with a reception to follow.

( [spedersen@herald.ca](mailto:spedersen@herald.ca))

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Antoine de Saint-Exupery

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