

## Living the New Story

spotlight on Mary Ellen Hill, Oakland, California

by Alan Tower and Karen Attix

"...Our new story is taking shape...we hope it soon will be expressed in music, poetry and ritual...such expressions will sensitize people to the story that every river and every star and every animal is telling...the goal is not read a book; the goal is to read the story taking place all around us."

from the introduction of The Universe Story by Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry

Mary Ellen Hill took this hope to heart and created, "The Story of the Universe", which is a live storytelling performance encompassing a scientific explanation and a mythic interpretation of the 15 billion year old evolution of the universe. Since 1987 she has been inspired by the works of Thomas Berry, Brian Swimme and Miriam MacGillis. Hearing Swimme say things in class such as, "we need to remember how to listen . . . we are the fireball becoming aware . . . , we must awaken the deep dream of the Universe", first ignited her into searching for a unique way to articulate the new story. Each time she would hear Thomas Berry speak he always emphasized that, "we need to know the sacred creation story of the emergent Universe for if we don't know this story we don't know ourselves", which further inspired her to develop her expression of the story. As she experienced the Spiral Walk, created by Miriam MacGillis, she was fueled with more desire to tell the story of this magnificent and frightening universe in which we find ourselves immersed. While at a storytelling swap she realized the ancient art of the oral tradition would be a perfect medium of expression. When taking a Historical Storytelling class at Dominican College the class assignment was to choose a historical character and create an eight minute story . While her classmates choose famous people she choose the Universe. This eight minute version propelled her into three years of studying, researching and groping to create "The Story of the Universe".

Mary Ellen has been performing this story since 1995 in a variety of venues for both adults and children. Each telling is unique and tailor-made according to the audience and theme. The most recent incarnation was at the San Francisco Morrison Planetarium on July 18, 2000. She collaborated for the first time, with composer/performer Alan Tower, leader of the group Free Energy. Hill and Tower led the audience in chants and invited them to participate by making the first rain sounds on earth that created the oceans. Tower used an array of distinctly acoustic, one-of-a-kind ceramic and wood instruments made/invented by Free Energy group members to help evoke the sublime mystery of the Universe. After the show many people came up to investigate and were able to try out the instruments after the performance!

A few comments about the show by audience members:

"How exhilarating to move through the evolutionary process with the accompaniment of music and wonderful planetarium dramatics. I felt the pulsing of the heartbeat of the Universe in that darkened room made warm by Mary Ellen's voice and the sound of the didjeridu." (Janet Boggia) "It is one thing to listen to the words, the chants and to feel the music...but

to also see the super nova, Milky Way and all our sister planets was probably second only to being on the moon itself and looking at our water home from afar." (Karen Attix)"What really works about the Story of the Universe is that it incorporates science into the stories, creating a very powerful medium to transfer information and entertain."(Kirsten Vanstone)  
"I was entranced by the magical blending of sound, music, song, words and visuals...I appreciated the inclusion of the mythic stories which added more depth..." (Ceia Correa) "I loved how the audience was invited to sing...my cells were singing in the excitement as the tale of their origins was evoked..." (Kei Harris) "Nestled in the dark ...I felt present in the womb of the Universe itself, witnessing my own birth some 14 billion years ago. I hope many people hear the story of where we came from and how we got here, because that will help us to know who we are and what we must do" (Joanna Reynolds)

Other comments from audience members have since sparked an interest for Mary Ellen in developing more hands-on materials, props and scenery for a more interactive type of performance. Some audience members also indicated they would love to see a show dedicated completely to the new scientific story of the Cosmos, focusing on the cultural myths in a different show.

Stay tuned for the next step in the evolution of Mary Ellen Hill as the heart and voice of an ever changing universe!

Karen Attix and Alan Tower

Karen is currently studying and teaching Pilates, a mind-body approach to health  
Alan is working on a new record, 10,000 Thunderstorms

*the spirit of evolution*