



PHOTO: STEVEN LEE

MIND THE MUSIC: Louis Francis Albert says that hitting a drum can trigger feel-good waves.

A different beat

Drummer Louis Francis Albert uses music therapy to help the mentally troubled feel good

► Kok Tse Wei

IT'S not a haven of calm inside this room at the Oasis Day Centre in Potong Pasir. "Give me one time. Hit on the fifth count — one-two-three-four," Louis Francis Albert calls to eight people on a recent Thursday afternoon at the centre run by the Singapore Association for Mental Health (SAMH).

This is a drumming session and the facilitator is urging them to let loose on instruments like the Chinese gong and African djembe.

Music fans may have heard of Louis, a Singaporean drummer who formed a band called Culture Drummer 15 years ago. They played here and abroad, with a repertoire fusing Western and ethnic instrumentation.

The band broke up in 2002 and Louis, 55, has since gone on to use his skills to provide a form of music therapy.

"Every time you hit the drums, you trigger the alpha brain waves — the feel-good waves," he says.

"That's why when you give children something to play, they enjoy hitting it. They feel good when they do it, even if they don't know why," he adds.

He has read several books about drum therapy, including *The Healing Power Of The Drum* by American psychotherapist Robert Lawrence Friedman.

According to several articles online, alpha brain waves may help to reduce anxiety as well as increase creativity when big alpha bursts are generated in the left brain.

The alpha state can be seen as a relaxed but alert state of mind.

Louis has played facilitator for 3½ years now, after he was first approached by the Pertapis Children's Home to teach drumming.

At the SAMH, he conducts lessons for two groups of 14 people each. The one-hour sessions are held once a week.

He works with people aged four to 81 and they may be totally new to drums. But within 15 minutes, "I can get anyone to use both hands and legs to play", he says with a chuckle.

His teaching tools include the Chinese gong, Malay kompang, Indian towel drum, African djembe and Egyptian dumbek, in addition to Western instruments like the timbale and bongo.

"I use ethnic instruments to get them interested; it's part of their culture so they respond better.

"At the end of the day, I just want them to hit something to trigger the alpha brain waves," says Louis, who has two grown-up children.

But some become tired or disinterested after a while "so they don't reach the alpha state. They just don't get into the drumming", he admits.

But there's a pay-off for those who persevere. "I can see the progress in some — from not wanting to talk to me or touch the instrument to looking forward to seeing me and playing," he says.

"To me, that's healing. Their anger and inferiority complex are gone. They're connecting with society."

The results are also apparent to the social workers at the institute.

Community education officer Liew Shiang Hui, 27, says: "They've become more disciplined, more aware of the present and happier

after the drumming sessions.

"They look forward to the lessons every week and make the effort to come to the centre."

According to a 44-year-old participant, drumming helps him to focus.

"Music heals the mind. In music, there's an order and we have to follow one timing," he says.

It has also been eye-opening for Louis, who says he has to play counsellor when his charges get into small disagreements.

"There's this guy in my class who called one of the girls sexy, and she got upset because she thought he was talking about sex.

"I had to explain that what he means is that she has style. But most of the time, they settle arguments among themselves."

He has also learnt to decipher the emotions and thoughts of the participants as they play.

"Drumming is a very powerful tool for setting off feelings like anger,

fear and sadness. Sometimes people cry because they play with thoughts of sad experiences.

"If I see somebody's face changing — anger is coming — I'll ask him to take a deep breath, and we laugh and talk about other things."

He also works with groups from the People's Association, the Pertapis Senior Citizens Fellowship Home as well as children's homes. Currently, he conducts lessons for a total of 58 people weekly.

While he charges less for non-profit groups, he says nothing beats the ultimate reward of reaching out to people.

"Each time I go to the SAMH centre, they are all so happy to see me. They talk to me with big smiles and that's a feeling money can't buy."

'Music heals the mind. In music, there's an order and we have to follow one timing'

— A 44-year-old participant in drum therapy