

LIC jazz drummer merges music with activism

BY SHIRA FRAGER

While many people attempt to impact others through song, lecture or writing, Vinson Valega uses jazz to encourage social change.

Drummer Valega hopes to make a difference through his music, and in the creation of Consilience Productions, a nonprofit organization, Valega's goal to involve others in the democratic process of social change has come alive through his website, social networking sites, liner notes on CD releases and concert performances.

Valega, who lives in Long Island City, believes jazz is a successful way to promote change because it embodies the original American spirit of freedom. The European classical musical traditions blended with the African-American blues, and the structure and performance of jazz parallels the system of democracy. Valega said jazz represents freedom while inviting the participation of others and acceptance of a diverse society.

"An economics major in col-

lege, I was fascinated with how the world works economically, socially and politically," said Valega. "The idea was to merge my two different worlds: the music world and social change."

After having produced his own music, Valega established Consilience Productions in 2003 to promote his works. He created a website meant to educate people about jazz and try to pique audience interest and participation. While jazz represented 7 percent of record sales among audiences in the 1980s, that number decreased by 5 percent over the years. Valega is trying to bring back audiences to appreciate the art of jazz.

"The idea is to bring jazz music, which is America's only classical art form... to a greater audience in America and around the world," said Valega.

According to a press release about Consilience Productions and Valega's aspirations, the commitment of musicians and citizens to democratic ideals leads to freedom of expression and participation in the greater good.

Valega said people are ap-

thetic when it comes to promoting change, and he has spent the last several years involved in politics and activism, advocating for various progressive causes to try and increase awareness and participation. He campaigned at John Kerry's election in 2004 and for a Philadelphia candidate in 2006 and organized musicians in the Philadelphia area to donate their time to promote his cause.

Chris Neidl, advocacy communications outreach coordinator of solarone.org, spoke at Valega's concert in January about a renewable energy policy in New York.

"I explained what the policy was, how it's meant to boost renewable energy," said Neidl, who was impressed with Valega's efforts in combining the arts and activism.

"He's just gotten started at this," said Neidl, "He has the right idea in mind. I think it would be a very effective approach."

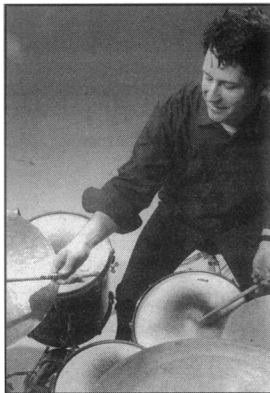
Valega reached out to a variety of audiences, including kids. Starting with a panel discussion on mentorship back in November, he lectured in schools, emphasizing

the importance of music by relaying its connection with academic topics. Valega then brought students together with music producers, introducing them to the daily life of a jazz musician.

His nonprofit, Consilience Productions, "is really doing some fantastic stuff," said Chris DiGirolamo, a publicist for Two For The Show Media, an organization that helps promote Valega's music. DiGirolamo wrote in an e-mail that Valega "does some great workshop shows and is working towards opening a center in Long Island City for arts programs."

Consilience Productions enabled Valega to produce CDs such as "Awake," "Consilience," "El Medico de Coqui" and his latest, "Biophilia." The organization plans to implement projects promoting its organization, which will include a community center, daily and monthly concerts, live jazz, a session series educating the public about the art of jazz, democracy workshop series and music for campaign events.

Though it is difficult to judge how much of an impact Valega has made, he says the large audiences



Drummer Vinson Valega uses music to engage his audiences in social issues and hopes to open a community center in Long Island City.

and online traffic are indicative of his success, as well as the written and oral positive responses he had received.

"There's been a lot of enthusiasm amongst everyone we present these ideas to," he said.

For more on Valega and Consilience Productions, visit www.cslproductions.org.