* If you had to describe Botala, how would you?

I try to keep it to one sentence. *“Botala blends the sounds of traditional Afro-Cuban and Brazilian music with house and Afro Beat, including live percussion and live looping.”* I try to stick pretty close to that.

* How did you come up with the name and idea for Botala

Obatala is one of the orishas (gods) in Santeria, which is based in the Ifa religion from Nigeria, where a lot of the music in the Caribbean originated. I sort of re-mixed the word for Obatala and got Botala. Unfortunately I was a little too busy patting myself on the back for being clever to research the fact that “Botala” is also the name of a small town in Northern Pakistan (Punjab region). So, I get a lot of international folks liking my page and messaging me in Pashtun. I might have as big a fan-base there as I do in Northern Michigan ;)

I came up with the project after trying to figure out a way to play solo while incorporating some of the different world instruments and music that I love so much. I had done some percussion play along with Clark Pellegrom and Franck Nowak who are both great Northern Michigan DJ’s. I also leaned on my buddy Nick Ayers for ‘spiritual guidance’. He’s a great musician, DJ, dancer, performer. I had a little bit of hesitation about what I was doing, or that I would somehow violate the rules of the DJ world. He assured me that most of it is just trusting your ears and having good taste. The technical stuff I just had to figure out in my basement.

* Not a lot of people up here really and truly play world music in the same sense you do. It’s an interesting concept that draws people in though. What draws you to world music?

Drum set was my main instrument growing up, but at some point I got into North Indian Classical music (tabla, sitar etc…) I was always drawn to different sounds from other countries, but without the internet it was really incumbent upon me to piece together the history, or influences of artists I liked from the jazz world or wherever. Eventually I zeroed in on West African, Afro-cuban, and Brazilian percussion and just followed my ears. I fell right into bands and dance scenes with teachers and mentors for a decade in Colorado before moving up here. There’s something transporting about world music, especially in playing it with other people. It’s joyful and emotive and intense as well as mysterious. I love history and geography as well and those subjects are built right into the world of Ethnomusicology. I’ve just always been pulled in that direction.

* In your view, how does Botala stand out from other regional bands, groups, musicians, etc… across the region?

Well, I’m just a one-man operation not a band, and I’m careful not to refer to myself as a DJ (*out of respect for real DJ’s*). I’m playing things that you just don’t hear up here. It’s great for dancing and it creates a very cool vibe that might help remind people that the “world” isn’t that far away. Sometimes it feels like we’re pretty isolated up here, and despite the fact that I *am* ultimately just another white dude with a belly and a beard, I truly do love this music and like to think that I’m helping provide some cultural diversity to the area. I like to think of myself as a “sonic tour-guide”.

* What are some of your favorite memories or accomplishments with this project?

I think the fact that I’m travelling all over the state for gigs and festivals and events after just making this project up 2 years ago is pretty cool. I hire dancers when I can. Jaclyn Dawn Morrow from Ann Arbor, Devon Grice from Marquette, and Ameenah Asante from Lansing. They’re all good friends and wonderful dancers and artists. It’s awesome to have someone facilitate the dancing and help get the smiles going. I don’t think there is any better compliment though than having someone from Cuba, Brazil, or Puerto Rico tell me that I’m playing great music and they want to know where I am next. It’s kind of the ultimate validation that I’m doing something right.

* What’s the long term goal for Botala? Recording? Touring?

This is the 3rd year that I’ll say ‘I hope I can find time to produce some more original stuff’, but honestly it’s hard to find time to do anything beyond show up and perform. I’m doing more festivals and special events this year, and I really think that’s the direction this has to go for me. I can do solo shows for 3 hours, but that’s a lot to ask of a crowd.

I would like to continue to build more live instruments into the show. I feature balafon, and percussion and some live looping, but I’m working on my set for Bliss and hope to really feature a lot of the live stuff.

* How do you find a balance between the many other projects you work on, your job and a family while still being able to do it all?

I get this question a lot. I keep a monthly calendar on FB for my wife and I to look at so there’s no surprises. I only do gigs I know I want to do. I feel like 90% of the answer to most things in life is just to show up on time, have a good attitude and be ready to improvise. I also joke about operating in a “72 hour window” which means, don’t look too far ahead or I might start freaking out. I do have a lot of other stuff going on beyond music, but I feel like all of the chaos and responsibility of being an adult and a father and a husband and an artist are all just wonderful problems to have. Life is a rollercoaster, and I try to find balance by not letting myself take anything too seriously. Including myself.

* What other projects do you work on?

I have a 9-5 job that gives me quite a bit of independence. I am the president of MAPL, and Program Committee Chairman of MOGA. I am the concert manager, and producer of the Sojourn Summer Concert Series at the Sojourn Lakeside Resort in Gaylord. I’m on the board of Boyne City Park and Rec., I play in the Jon Archambault Band, and have my own jazz quartet as well.

* Anything else you’d like to add about Botala?

I really am super grateful to my wife who has laughed along with me as I have embarked on this project. We joke about this being my “midlife crisis”, but I think I’m still 10 years away from really cracking. Despite the fact that this is a “solo” project, I am supported by so many great folks and artists in the state who like what I’m doing and are interested in helping. Jeff Shoup, and Randall Moore have helped me a lot down state. I’m grateful to everyone who has booked me or helped find me a stage for this project. Tim Freeman has been a real catalyst for bringing cool music to the area and I feel like he has always been encouraging me to do “weird” things, which is an intentionally vague statement. You can like and follow my FB page for dates. Just look for Botala and make sure it’s me, not the village in Pakistan ;)